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7

Law Undergraduates' Understanding and Appropriation of Arguments in Online Essay Writing Tutorials

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Abstract

The art of constructing an assertive argument is a crucial lifelong skill for law students to master. The English language teachers at Bennett University Law School introduce the topic of argumentative essay writing to its first-year law undergraduates and teach the basic structure of an argument in a standard five paragraph argumentative essay and then gradually elaborate on the content. The pedagogy makes use of the online platforms of i-Learn learning management and Clarity English programs (customised English language teaching software) to engage students in essay writing tutorials. The study analyses how the students develop the understanding of framing a strong argument and move towards attaining appropriation in it. This was done by comparing pre-test and post-test results of the control and experimental groups and by content analysis of the transcripts. The target group in the study included 120 students of BA LLB (Hons) who are divided into control and experimental groups. The study also tries to figure out the comparative advantage of classroom teaching in physical settings, online group discussions on i-Learn forums, and individual practice sessions on Study Skills Success and the Practical Writing program offered by Clarity English. This was done through student survey analysis. The overall data involved pre-test and post-test essay writing transcripts, online discussion forum transcripts on i-Learn, and student surveys. This educational intervention is an attempt to assess and design the best teaching practice with available resources for teaching argumentative essay writing to law undergraduates.

主張する議論を構築する技術は法科の学生が獲得すべき重要な一生涯のスキルである。ベネット大学ロースクールの英語教員は、1年生に対して論理的小論文のトピックを紹介し、5パラグラフからなる議論の基本構造を教え、内容を練る。この教授法ではiLearn LMSとClarity Englishプログラム(英語教育のために作られたソフトウェア)というオンラインプラットフォームを利用し、学生を論文作成チュートリアルに参加させている。本研究は学生がどのように強い主張の構築を理解し、自分のものとするのかについて分析する。研究は実験群と比較群の事前テストと事後テストの結果の比較とトランスクリプトの内容分析によって行われた。被験者はBA LLB(Hons)の学生120人で実験群と比較群に分けられた。また、本研究は、教室での指導とiLearnフォーラムでのオンライングループディスカッション、そしてClarity Englishが提供するStudy Skill SuccessやPractical Writingによる自習の相対的利点を明らかにしようと試みる。これは学生調査の分析によって行われる。データは事前テストと事後テストにおける小論文のト

ランスクリプトとiLearnでのオンラインディスカッションのトランスクリプト、そして学生調査を含む。本研究は法科の学生に論理的小論文を教えるために利用可能なリソースを用いた最良の指導の実践を評価、デザインする試みである。

Keywords: Arguments, online tutorials, law undergraduates, LMS, Clarity English

Lawyers need to have good persuasive and argumentative skills - more than anybody else as it is a life skill for them that they need to acquire with perfection (Viator, 2011; Barnwell, 2015). An aspiring lawyer needs to place a lot of emphasis on learning the ways of presenting cogent arguments in a clear and persuasive manner. Learning about arguments in both spoken and written form provides a strong basis for them in the future to connect it with the cases they would handle in the future. So, what needs to be taught to the students of law first is, Raise your voice but improve your argument first. Argument writing is a key skill for law students to master. Almost all components of academic writing involve the construction and justification of an argument for them. While devising the syllabus for an academic writing course for law students, one of the components that cannot be dispensed with is writing a balanced argument in order to get effective persuasion (Bruce, 2002; Ashley et al., 2004; Carr, 2003; Pinkwart et al., 2006). Argumentative writing is a highly important yet lesser researched area for undergraduate education (Pessoa et al., 2017), especially in law courses. Looking at the importance of this component, instructors need to provide maximum practice to students for refining their ability to draft a sound argument. Moreover, it is essential to first develop the understanding among students of the basic structure of an argument and provide essential scaffolds (Øgreid & Hertzberg, 2009) to enable them to appropriate it.

The terms appropriation and scaffolds have reference to Vygotsky's (1980) socio-cultural theory that states that in order to get students internalise any concept, they need to be provided with some support mechanism or scaffolds so that they can gradually move from their entry level of proficiency to the expected level of outcome and attain appropriation in it. In the present research these support mechanisms that work on interaction, collaboration and self- regulation are the online platforms of i-Learn, i.e., a Moodle-based university learning management system (LMS) (discussion forums in the present research) and online language learning programs offered by Clarity English (CE). CE is a Hong Kong-based group that provides customised programs for online English learning. Bennett University has taken subscription to four of its programs-Study Skills Success (SSS), Practical Writing (PW), Tense Buster, and Road to IELTS. For teaching and learning argumentative skills, both LMS discussion forums and CE programs were used as technological scaffolds providing online writing tutorial sessions. These were utilised to support regular classroom teaching and learning process to assess and design the best teaching practice with the available online resources for teaching argumentative essay writing to law undergraduates.

Literature Review

Technical Scaffolds in Argument Writing

Scaffolding argument/argumentative essay writing with technology has been researched quite a few times in university and school settings (Hoffmann, 2015; Kim, 2018; Li, 2006; Lu & Zhang, 2013; Williams & Beam, 2019; Xu et al., 2019). Latifi et al. (2020) have studied the difference between the students' argumentative writing scores through two different treatments - worked examples and opportunities to collaborate and learn through scripting. The study shows that when opportunities for collaborative writing and peer feedback are provided to students, they learn significantly better than the students who learn through worked examples. Worked examples provide step-by-step details of the writing process to an argumentative essay and then expect the students to write on their own, whereas collaboration and scripting provide issues/topics to the students and allow them to explore and solve those issues in collaboration and then write on their own. The present study also employs two experimental groups given two different treatments - written group discussion (GD) on online forums over the LMS and a customised exercises group. The CE programs focus more on testing the basic understanding of students. The study develops on the future research direction given by Latifi et al. (2020) that use of both qualitative and quantitative approaches will give a better understanding of the difference in the performance level, student responses to the interventions and how students behave, interact during the treatments when they are provided with opportunities for independent learning, collaborate and give feedback.

Methodology

Design

The present study follows a quasi-experimental research design with consecutive sampling. As the design is implemented in educational settings, all available participants were considered (Fife-Schaw, 2006, p. 93; Park & Han, 2018). There were a total 120 students out of which 40 are in the control group and 40 each in the two experimental groups (see Figure 1). All these students were enrolled in the course English II offered as a compulsory course to law undergraduates during the II semester (2019–20) in I year at Bennett University. This course takes up the components of academic writing for law students.

The study focuses on analysing the effect of online tutorials using online LMS forums and CE programs. To see the effect of both types of online tutorials, multiple qualitative and quantitative methods – pre-test / post-test, content analysis and student surveys – have been employed.

Figure 1

Research Design, Groups, and Variables



Before starting to teach the component of argument writing, an entry level proficiency check of students' familiarity with an argument was also done for these students. It was observed that students entering Bennett Law School had negligible exposure to argumentative essays or argumentation until senior secondary level. 80% of the students did not learn that at school. A few students who were active public speakers mentioned frequently debating but oral form of argumentation is little different from written and more structured way of arguing, something that they were not aware of. To confirm it further, simple day-to-day argumentative prompts were given to students in the initial class and they were asked to write for/against the topic and then justify with reasons and evidence. The exercise showed that students were not able to differentiate between reasons and claims, and further that they could not find relevant evidence to support their claims which could directly relate to the reasons that they give to support their claims.

Blended Learning and Scaffolds for Online Tutorials

While teaching basics of argument structure under argumentative essay writing, the students were divided into three groups to test the efficacy of blended learning (Jin et al., 2020) – one control group and two experimental groups. The control group was not given any additional practice apart from classroom discussions on argument structure. Among experimental groups, experimental group 1 was given the treatment of online tutorial GD on debatable topics (see Figure 2) and the activity was named as online written GD and clear instructions regarding the parameters of evaluation were given to them. The students were required to post and centre their discussion on thesis statements, claims, reasons, and evidence, along with basic counterarguments and rebuttals. This was done to make them do focused discussion.

Figure 2
Online GD Topics as Posted on LMS



Experimental group 2 was given the task of completing all exercises in the unit of Critical Thinking of SSS and Essays: For and Against of PW among CE programs (see Figure 3).

Figure 3
Clarity English Programs



The exercises in these programs contain mostly objective type application-based questions that focus on testing – understanding of arguments, evaluating evidence, flawed logic, format, brainstorming, stages of writing, writing style and process, and language associated with argument and essay writing.

Both experimental groups participated in online tutorials related to structure and understanding of arguments. The basic difference between the treatments given to both experimental groups lies in two aspects:

1. Nature of the tasks: for group 1, it was an open group discussion with instructional scaffolding and increased scope for peer feedback while for group 2 it was

- individual practice sessions on the standardised and uniform online language learning programs.
- 2. Type of participation: for group 1 participation was instructionally structured, i.e., students had to follow the teacher's instructions regarding the type of posts with flexibility of quantity of content while for experimental group 2 it was highly structured having pre-determined program instructions and questions with no flexibility.

Research Questions

The present study attempts to create two different types of online tutorial environments for practicing and revising argument writing as a supplementary to the physical classroom. The study has five research questions:

- RQ1. Is there any significant difference in the mean gain scores of the control group and experimental group 1?
- RQ2. Is there any significant difference in the mean gain scores of the control group and experimental group 2?
- RQ3. Is there any significant difference in the mean gain scores of experimental groups 1 and 2?
- RQ4. What is the nature of online group discussion on argument structure?
- RQ5. What is the students' perception about online tutorials?

Data Collection as per the Pedagogical Sequence

In a two-month long teaching and tutorial process of argument structure and essays, students were first collectively taught the basics of argument writing and basic drafting of an argumentative essay for 4 weeks with two lectures per week. At the end of week four, a pre-test of all three groups was conducted (see Figure 4).

During week 5–7 the experimental groups were exposed to two different online tutorial environments – online GD on argument drafting over forums on LMS and CE programs' units on Critical Thinking and Essays: For and Against. A total of five groups of 8 students each (a total of 40) were created for online group discussion for the experimental group 1. Online transcripts of GD and performance sheets of CE programs were saved as records to analyse the GD and writing process as well as students' progression in structured programs of CE. Later, in week 8, a post-test of all three groups was conducted.

Figure 4

The Pedagogical Sequence



Data Analysis

Pre-test and Post-test

Pre-test and post-test analysis were done using an analytical rubric having 9 parameters: attention grabber, thesis statement, claims, evidence, reasoning, coherence, mechanics, conclusion, and documentation. The rubric defined a range of levels from 0 to 3 - 0 (unacceptable), 1 (developing), 2 (accomplished), and 3 (exemplary) – for befitting completion of each component of an argumentative essay. Total number of items in the rubric is nine that sets the highest score for the rubric at 27. For checking the validity and reliability of the rubric, it was rated by three academic writing experts. The experts agreed on 76.33% level of ratings. Cohen's Kappa Coefficient of reliability was .65 (p < .0.001) which is considered a good level of inter-rater reliability (Bakeman & Gottman, 1997).

Variables for pre-test and post-test analysis:

- The independent variable (IV): Online GD (Group 1); Exercises on CE Programs (Group 2)
- The dependent variable (DV): Argumentative essay writing

Student Surveys

Student surveys was taken separately for both experimental groups. The surveys for both group 1 and group 2 consisted of five open-ended questions. The questions sought students' opinions on their liking, disliking, and suggestions of the two online tutorial methods.

Content Analysis of Online GD Transcripts

Online GD transcripts provided the data to analyse the nature of written discussion on argument structure. It was done through content analysis of student posts on online discussion forums. The content analysis consists of defining a concept and tallying its presence (Busch et al., 2012). The defined concepts included components of an argument – thesis, claims, reasons, evidence, counterclaims, and rebuttals. Kappa statistic for inter-rater reliability was 0.69 (p < 0.001) which is a good level of inter-rater reliability.

Results and Discussion

Pre-test and Post-test

The scores of pre-test and post-test were analysed by descriptive and inferential statistics. The descriptive statistics analysed the tests on the mean, standard deviation, and percentages. The mean scores of the control group, experimental group 1, and experimental group 2 were assessed to see if any statistical difference exists in the performance of argumentative writing of students.

Descriptive Statistics

The results show that students in the experimental group 1 and 2 performed much better in the post-test than in the pre-test for the composite scores of argumentative essay writing than the control group. In the composite scores of the pre-test and post-test of the experimental group 1 (see Table 1), the mean score for pre-test was 16.33 and 23.33 for the post-test. The percentage increase in the mean score for experimental group 1 is 42.86%. In the composite scores of pre-test and post-test of experimental group 2 (see Table 1), the mean score for pre-test was 15.73 and 19.35 for the post-test.

Table 1Descriptive Statistics for Experimental and Control Group

	,	'	Std.			
Group		Mean	Deviation	% change		
Control Group	Pre-test	15.43	4.358	10 200/ increase in past tast scare		
	Post-test	17.02	4.854	10.30% increase in post-test score		
Experimental Group 1	Pre-test	16.33	4.221	42.060/ in groups in most test seems		
	Post-test	23.33	3.89	42.86% increase in post-test score		
Experimental Group 2	Pre-test	15.73	3.464	220/ :		
	Post-test	19.35	4.035	23% increase in post-test score		

The percentage increase in the mean score for experimental group 2 is 23%. For the control group, the mean score in pre-test was 15.43 and 17.02 in the post-test. The percentage

increase in the mean score was 10.30% which is much smaller than the percentage change of 42.86% and 23% for the experimental group 1 and 2, respectively.

Inferential Statistics

The research hypothesis 1 for analysing pre-test and post results is: The average score of argumentative essay writing for students who receive online GD treatment is greater than the average score of students who did not receive the treatment. The results from an independent samples t-test indicate that students who received recreated online GD treatment (see Table 2) (M = 23.33, SD = 3.89, N = 40) scored higher than students who did not receive the treatment (M = 17.02, SD = 4.854, N = 40). Cohen's effect size value (d = 1.434) suggested a 'large' effect size and high practical significance.

Table 2
Group Statistics I

Group	N	Mean	SD	df	T	<i>p</i> -value	Cohen's d	Remark
Experimental Group 1	40	23.33	3.89	78	-6.489	0.000	1.434	significant
Control Group	40	17.02	4.854					

The research hypothesis 2 for analysing pre-test and post results is: The average score of argumentative essay writing for students who received online CE tutorial treatment is greater than the average score of students who did not receive the treatment. The results from an independent samples t-test indicate that students who received recreated online DC treatment (see Table 3) (M = 19.35, SD = 4.035, N =40) scored higher than students who did not receive the treatment (M = 17.02, SD = 4.854, N =40). Cohen's effect size value (d = 0.521) suggested a 'medium' effect size and practical significance.

Table 3
Group Statistics II

Group	N	Mean	SD	df	T	<i>p</i> -value	Cohen's d	Remark
Experimental Group 2	40	19.35	4.035	78	-2.329	0.023	0.521	significant
Control Group	40	17.02	4.854					

The research hypothesis 3 for analysing pre-test and post results is: The average score of argumentative essay writing for students who receive online GD treatment is greater than the average score of students who received online CE tutorial treatment. The results from an independent samples t-test indicate that students who received recreated online DC treatment (see Table 4) (M = 23.33, SD = 3.89, N = 40) scored higher than students who received online CE tutorial treatment. (M = 19.35, SD = 4.035, N = 40). Cohen's effect size value (d = 1.004) suggested a large effect size and high practical significance.

Table 4
Group Statistics III

Group	N	Mean	SD	df	Т	<i>p</i> -value	Cohen's d	Remark
Experimental Group 2	40	23.33	3.89	78	-4.491	0.000	1.004	significant
Control Group	40	19.35	4.035					

Pre-test and post-test results indicate that both experimental groups 1 and 2 performed significantly better in post-test as compared to the control group. Between experimental groups, the performance of students of experimental group 1 is significantly better than the students of experimental group 2. This implies that though the students of both experimental groups gained better understanding and appropriation in argument writing, students engaged in online GD benefitted more than students who were engaged in highly structured CE programs of critical thinking and essays for and against. This also implies that when students are given flexibility and freedom of expressing themselves, while remaining careful about the integral elements and structure of an argument, they are more likely to self- regulate their learning process and subsequently improve.

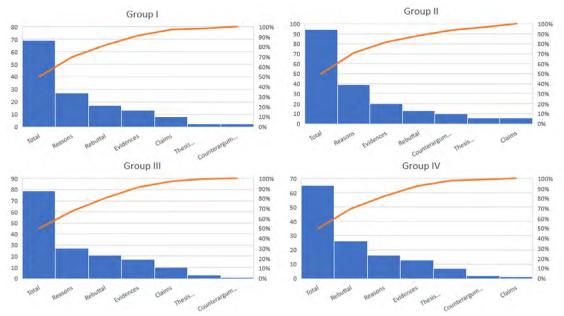
Nature of Online Group Discussion on Argument Structure

Experimental group 2 was involved in structured objective type exercises on CE programs, hence the nature of their learning process of argument writing could be understood only through a student survey whereas experimental group 1 did online written GD for which the transcripts were saved by the instructor to analyze the nature of discussion on argument structure. This was done by doing content analysis of the transcripts of the four groups made for GD on online forums on Bennett University's i-Learn LMS. This analysis of the nature of GD was done to see the elements most discussed, their strength and direction.

Content analysis was done by showing the frequency distribution of posts through Pareto charts. Pareto charts are made mainly to show that 80 percent of the cause of something is just 20 percent of the factors. Here, the charts show how maximum number of posts were contributed by just three components of an argument which is similar across the four groups made for GD on different topics (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Argument Component Frequency Distribution



The graphs in Figure 5 clearly reflect that the maximum number of posts contributed for reasons, rebuttal, and evidence for an argument once the thesis statement and claim are defined and decided among group members during the GD. The pattern was similar across groups. Surprisingly, even the number of counterarguments was smaller, which implies that students focused more on the justification of their stand through multiple reasons and evidence.

Student Surveys

Survey Results for Online GD on LMS i-Learn

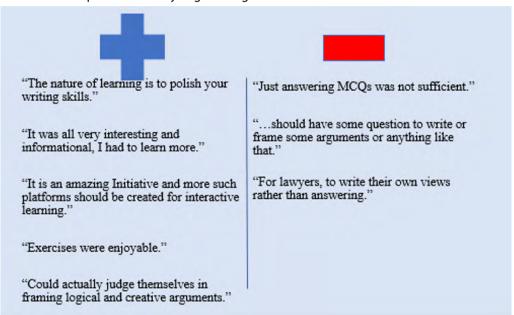
Student surveys for both experimental groups obtained mixed reactions. For experimental group 1, students acknowledged that online GD helped them focusing, refining, and justifying. Peer feedback was also taken as a crucial aspect while drafting and refining the argument: "It has helped me in learning how to frame an answer and present it so that it remains relevant and adds on to the discussion."

The students considered rebuttals as very effective in refining their argument. The only concern that the students expressed while discussing was that sometimes students got into heated debates while trying to disprove each other by blaming each other, and they deviated from the actual task. Some students expressed the desire of increased involvement of the instructor in the discussions so that such distractions from the actual task of argument discussion would not happen and students would start giving timely responses: "Some people took more time to respond to the arguments that were against my claims, so it was difficult to have a debate/a discussion actively."

Survey Results for Online Tutorial Based on Clarity English Programs

The CE program based online tutorial also entailed mixed reaction from the students. They added that the tasks were structured in such a manner that they helped students in polishing their writing skills. A few students found those informational and interesting to do and suggested to incorporate more such exercises. On the other hand, some students felt that the objective-type nature of questions was not sufficient to hone writing skills as such questions do not provide any space for free expression of ideas to students. They suggested some detailed writing practise to be given in place of very short answer questions like MCQs, fill the blanks, or one-word answers. They agreed to have some enhanced understanding of the flawed logic and sound argument but that did not allow them to write and correct their own arguments (see Figure 6).

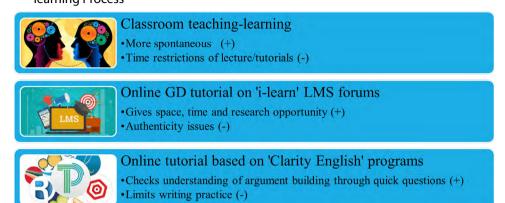
Figure 6Student Response on Clarity English Programs for Online Tutorial



The results of pre-test post-test, content analysis, and student surveys collectively have thrown light on the differences, benefits, and drawbacks of the three different ways of engaging students in teaching-learning process of argument writing in argumentative essays. The study tried to do a comparative analysis of classroom teaching in physical settings, online group discussions on i-Learn LMS forums and individual practice sessions involving only one student at a time on SSS and PW program offered by CE. It was found that in the physical classroom students tend to be more spontaneous and come with very interesting and original ideas but those ideas could be only strengthened through further research and alleviation of time and space constraints of a physical classroom (see Figure 7).

Figure 7

Comparative Advantages/Disadvantages of Different Ways of Argument Writing Teaching-learning Process



The online tutorial of GD on argumentative topics gives the convenience of time and space for doing adequate research on the given topics. But there is a possibility of having some authenticity issues about the content posted by students. On the other hand, online tutorials based on CE programs check the understanding of the students through some quick questions but have a drawback of limiting the writing practice, feedback, and internalising the writing process of arguments.

Conclusion

The present study attempts to analyse the development in the understanding of the students in framing a strong argument and movement towards attaining appropriation in it. Both experimental groups showed some improvement in their understanding of argument structure and they performed better in their post-test results. But out of the two groups, experimental group 1 showed better performance. It implies that complimentary and spontaneous contribution by the students engaged in online GD worked better on their understanding and appropriation than the structured exercises of CE programs. This happened as the students, in online GDs, were subjected to an environment where they had to become critics of not only their own learning but also of their peers' learning. The study also aimed to devise the best pedagogical practice for honing argumentative writing skills among law students. While analysing the comparative advantages and disadvantages of teaching learning process during physical classroom teaching, online writing tutorials on LMS discussion forums, and CE programs, it was observed that all three ways have their own benefits. In agreement with Latifi et al. (2020), the present study also suggests that both approaches have their own benefits, and it is necessary to analyse how those could be used in honing different aspects of students' writing. These different methods, if blended with proper planning, can help students better appropriate the writing of arguments. Spontaneous quick discussions can be fostered during classroom teaching which could be taken further to an online platform for GD for getting insight into argument development with proper structure. This would also address the problem of time crunch during regular lectures. Clarity English

programs comprise some standardised exercises which could help students to quickly estimate their understanding of critical thinking, flaws in logic, argument structure, and essay structure. These exercises can be incorporated into blended learning as tools for checking students' in depth understanding in the form of quizzes. Certain issues found in online tutorials like the issue of authenticity of posts by the students with respect to the originality of idea and proxy participation during online GDs in asynchronous mode could be a subject of further research as a valuable addition to the pedagogy.

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Appendix A

Rubric for Pre-test and Post-test

	,	Marks								
		0	1	2	3					
S. No.		(unacceptable)	(developing)	(accomplished)	(exemplary)	Total				
1	Attention grabber	Not found/ irrelevant	Attention grabber needs refining	Attention grabber attracts attention and connects to the purpose	Impressive and perfectly connecting attention grabber					
2	Thesis statement	No thesis statement/ irrelevant statement	The thesis statement needs refining	Clear thesis statement	Very well drafted, clear thesis statement					
3	Claims									
4	Evidence	No evidence/ irrelevant evidence	Evidence found but not consistently with all claims	Evidence found with all claims	Very strong evidence					
5	Reasoning	No supporting reasons with claims/ irrelevant reasons	Reasons found but not consistently with all claims	Reasons found with all claims	Very strong reasons with all claims					
6	Coherence	No thematic connection	Maintained at some places	Shows thematic unity	Very systematic and well organised					
7	Mechanics	No attention paid	Considered at some points	Rare error	No error					
8	Conclusion	Ineffective or no conclusion.	Not emphasized main points and lacks clarity.	Emphasized main points with and clarity.	Emphasized main points with effective clinchers and summarized with clarity					
9	Documentation	Not found	Not in proper format/ irregular	Done for all references	Done for all in accurate format					
10	TOTAL									

Appendix B

Student Survey for Online Group Discussion on LMS i-Learn

Dear Student, you are requested to share your experience of online GD and argument writing on online forums. Your honest responses will help in determining the efficacy of the assignment. Please respond to all sections of the questionnaire. All the information will be kept confidential.

- Qs. 1. Share your experience of online group discussion.
- Qs. 2. Has peer feedback helped you in refining your argument or any component of argument claim, reason, evidence? If yes, state how?
- Qs. 3. What problem did you face in online written discussion?
- Qs. 4. Any suggestion for improvement.
- Qs. 5. Anything else you want to share.

Appendix C

Student Survey for Online Tutorial Based on Clarity English Programs

Dear Student, you are requested to share your learning experience of *Critical thinking* of SSS and *Essays: for and against* of PW among CE programs. Your honest responses will help in determining the efficacy of the assignment. Please respond to all sections of the questionnaire. All the information will be kept confidential.

- Qs. 1. Share your experience of online tutorial based on Clarity English Programs.
- Qs. 2. Have structured exercises helped you in refining your argument or any component of argument- claim, reason, evidence? If yes, state how?
- Qs. 3. What problem did you face in online tutorial based on Clarity English Programs?
- Qs. 4. Any suggestion for improvement.
- Qs. 5. Anything else you want to share.

Author's Bio

Suman Luhach is an Assistant Professor of English in School of Law, Bennett University, India. She has a PhD in English from BITS Pilani, India. Her research and interest areas include academic and advanced writing skills of college students, online collaborative language learning, CALL, ELT, legal English, and literary theories.