

# Argumentative Writing as an Academic Routine in Nurturing Critical Thinking Skills of EFL Learners

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**Abstract.** Having proficient skill in argumentative writing is prominent for writing success. It is required in daily life for long life learning. The argumentative writing assists students to develop their critical thinking (henceforward, CT) which involves higher order thinking skills (hereafter, HOTS). This research aims at portraying how the CT elements are portrayed in the students' argumentative writing. It is also in the attempt to reveal the development of their CT. In collecting the data, the sophomore students were involved, and their argumentative essays were investigated as the primary data. To support the data, interview and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) were implemented. The analysis is based on Stapleton's criteria of CT (2001) which involve claims, reasons, evidences, recognition of opposing arguments and refutations, conclusion and fallacies. It was revealed that the students were proficient in making claims. The claims were the stated explicitly in the thesis statement combining with reasons. Moreover, they gave reasoning towards their claims and proposed refutations towards the opposing arguments. However, their insufficiency of reasons and evidence weakened their arguments in the essay. For the conclusion, they restated their claim which showed their position as the writer. In term of fallacies, most of them were in the form of irrelevance and over simplifications.

**Keywords:** argumentative writing, critical thinking skill, EFL.

## 1 Introduction

Nowadays, in EFL learning, argumentative writing is crucial for university students as they are prepared in facing worldwide rapid changes in education and technology. EFL students are demanded to write their argument and support it by using English. Argumentative writing is a composition wherein writers give their opinion and arguments which supported by evidence to support or defend position [1]. The capability of argumentative writing is crucial because it is greatly used in the field of both education and workplace [2]. Argumentative writing is to convince and persuade readers that writers' point of views on a controversial issue is correct [3]. One of argumentative writing products is argumentative essay which requires students to study a topic by collecting data, generating, and evaluating evidence which lead them to concisely establish a position on the topic. This type of essay requires deep research [4]. Thus, in establishing argumentative essay, a crystal clear thesis statement and sound reasoning are prerequisite.

However, argumentative essay is an uneasy task. Argumentative essay is the most difficult and complex essay amongst others in argumentative writing since it needs critical thinking skill [5]. Moreover, it is well noted that Indonesian students are more familiar with

narration, for example, writing about their personal experiences within diaries or journals rather than any other types of writing [6]. Accordingly, even when they are assigned to write an argumentative essay, they tend to produce narration and recklessly write an argumentation. Indonesian students lack implicit knowledge about argumentative conventional pattern which consequently bring them not knowing how to write an intriguing united and coherent argumentative essay [7].

Argumentative writing should reflect the aspects of critical thinking (known as CT) to some extent [8]. The problem of the students' argumentative writing skill is not only because their lack of English competencies but also critical thinking skill as another factor influencing students' writing namely critical thinking (CT) [9]. CT comprises scrutinizing and reasonably criticizing particular issues. It becomes crucial aspect in relation to writing. Watson and Glaser (2012) define CT related to the ability that writers have in identifying and analyzing problems to grasp a proper conclusion [10]. CT is regarded to be the most influential factor in argumentative writing and they also concluded that having critical thinking skill in higher education is crucial and plays a significant role in understanding the learning process [11]. Argumentative essay should cover six critical thinking elements, namely; argument, reason, evidence, opposition and refutation, conclusion, and fallacy [12].

Based on the aforementioned explanation, it has been argued that the students' argumentative writing skill is closely related to critical thinking skill. Therefore, this study is intended to scrutinize and explore the elements of CT applied in the argumentative essays written by the sophomore students in English Language Education Study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education.

## 2 Method

This research was designed as a descriptive qualitative study which involved 69 respondents whose background were the fourth semester students who had enrolled in Argumentative Writing course in English Language Education Study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Mahasaraswati Denpasar University. All respondents were Indonesian, and the language of instruction is English.

Moreover, the respondents were involved in 4 meetings of producing argumentative essays wherein the researcher implemented the writing process (outlining, drafting, revising, editing and publishing). All respondents wrote argumentative essays independently based on the topics assigned to them. The meetings were broken down into 2 sessions, and the topics assigned were varied in each session. The writing process was conducted within communicative and learner-centered teaching and learning wherein each CT element was investigated [12].

In order to gain a rich set of data, the researcher collected all argumentative essays created by the respondents, then all essays were scrutinized to highlight the key words indicating all CT elements. To gain additional data, interview and Focus Group Discussion (hereafter, FGD) were conducted. The interview and FGD were targeted at a small group of respondents who were regarded as the representative of the whole participants. Ten interviewees were invited to join the individual interview and FGD. They were chosen because they were identified as being interested in further follow up. The interview and FGD were tape recorded, transcribed and analyzed. The yielded data from analyzing the essays resulted frequencies of each CT

element that translated into tables to facilitate the interpretation. The data collected from conducting interview and FGD were filtered, presented and verified.

### 3 Results and Discussion

**Table 1.** The Frequencies of CT Elements in the Students' Argumentative Essays

No	Element	Frequencies
A	Argument	138
B	Reason	414
C	Evidence	472
D	Opposition and refutation	256
E	Conclusion	138
F	Fallacy	38

**Table 1** reveals the frequencies of each CT element within the students' argumentative essays. These findings on the frequencies are beneficial in elaborating and interpreting the CT elements used by the students. Actually, the findings have highlighted the critical thinking (CT) of the students through their essays. Furthermore, they also broaden the insights on CT elements of the students. CT and the findings related to each CT element will be discussed as follows:

#### A. Argument

A sound argument is a writer's point of view on particular topic that is presented in a clear and logical way which reflect transparent and convincing stage of reasoning. A main argument, known as claim, all by itself is not very strong. A good writer needs reasons to support the claim and evidences to support the reasons[13].When it comes to crafting an argument, a writer has to be highly aware of objective argument, it is the one completely unbiased.

Based on the findings, the students had one argument represented the main idea of their argumentative essays. It was written in the form of thesis statement which stated at the end of the introductory paragraph. They started their introductory paragraph by developing the general statements related to the topic and ended it specifically by thesis statement. Most students formulated the thesis statement by linking the claim and the reasons in the attempt to create a working thesis statement that will not only guide the argument, but also what the writers should be researching to build a strong argument.

#### Extract A.1

*Sport is an activity that has been done by everyone. Sport includes all forms of competitive physical activity or games which, through casual or organized participation, aim to use, maintain or improve physical ability and skills while providing enjoyment to participants, and in some cases, entertainment for spectators. Many people are obsessed with sport. However, parents think that exercise for children is not needed even though there are many positive effect that can be obtained. Therefore, sport must be done by children because of 3 reasons; immune system improvements, character building, and physical development. (Student 1)*

Most opening sentences in the argumentative essays are used to arise a problem, that is the main argument [14]. It is in with this extract A.1, student 1 wrote the thesis statement by combining the claim “sport must be done by children” with the reasons “immune system improvements, character building, and physical development”. Thus, the readers are given clues what will be talking about in the next 3 body paragraphs through concisely mentioning the reasons.

#### Extract A.2

*Marriage is a sacral ceremony that unites two people in a personal relationship. Everyone wants to get the best couple for their future that can make their family proud. They try to get couples by following social organization, campus committee, and other activities. For some people to find a partner in the same culture is easy, but what about a migrant? Migrant people will find their partner in the different culture that called cross cultural marriage. In this case, cross culture marriage is good for human’s social aspects. By doing cross cultural marriage, people will get three benefits. (Student 2)*

In extract A.2, student 2 wrote vague thesis statement. Nevertheless, the main idea does not always appear at the outset of the introductory paragraph [15]. Similarly, the extract A2 has unclear claim, and the point of the reasons to support the argument were not explicitly stated, and, therefore, did not represent the whole essay.

#### B. Reason

Having decided the argument, the students must support it by reasons. Reasons are obligatory in argumentative essay as an argument becomes mere opinion if it is unsupported by reasons. Good arguments provide good reasons to believe that their conclusions are true [16]. Actually, the students were assigned to create argumentative essay with alternating pattern that necessitates writers to formulate each body paragraph contains one contra argument to start the body paragraphs, and it is rebutted by PRO arguments. The PRO arguments are the development of the concise reasons stated in the thesis statements. Moreover, in this pattern, the students did not explicitly present any particular point, but instead refute three contra points. The pattern contains five paragraphs: introduction, three paragraphs, one for each CON point and conclusion.

#### Extract B.1

*It has been argued that more sunlight reflects to the planet which means we get more energy to warm the planet, but the crucial problem is global warming creates extreme weather and climate change to the world, like rainfall in Ethiopia. Another example is in The Montana Glacier national park has only 25 glaciers instead of 150 that were there in the year 1910 (buyessayfriend.com). Sea levels are expected to rise between 18 and 59 cm by the end of the century (national geographic). Extreme weather makes destruction and death. Too much rain can cause flooding, too much hot weather without any rain in long periods can cause drought. The worst thing is extreme weather can destroy entire city or huge areas of land, causing deaths and affecting to the lives of the people living there. (Student 2)*

Extract B.1 reveals that student 2 as the writer started the body paragraph by compounding the CON point and PRO point. The coordinating conjunction used is “but” to suggest a contrast. This PRO point is the reason to directly support the claim. The greatest variety of reasoning happens during essay writing, meaning that this activity provides time for

students to think most flexibly when they develop their ideas [14]. Through reasoning, the students have the opportunities to develop arguments based on the interconnections between many claims from various resources.

#### Extract B.2

*It is generally debatable that multilingual children enjoying a bilingual environment run the risk of being isolated by the host society or of being teased by their peers when speaking in the foreign language. This teasing can have a detrimental effect on the self-esteem of the children. In contrast, multilingual children are usually confident to speak foreign languages. It makes them easy to speak with foreign people because they have already excelled many foreign languages. Knowing more than one language, also can help the children feel at ease in different environments. It creates a natural flexibility and adaptability, and it increases her self-esteem and self-confidence. Children in multilingual environments have a better feel for the cultural differences and peculiarities of the world. It can be helpful for them when they get some problems in their life. They will be tough to clear it by their own way. (Student 4)*

Similar to student 2, the extract B.2 shows that student 4 started the body paragraph by stating several CON points. The CON and PRO points, students can compare and contrast texts presenting opposing views on a controversial topic in the course of arriving at their own position on the topic [17]. When student 4 counter-argued, she considered a possible argument against her thesis or some aspects of her reasoning. Afterwards, student 4 gave reasons rebutting the CON points as well as supporting the claim.

#### C. Evidence

Actually, the reasons support the claim, and the evidence supports the reasons. Once writers have formulated their claim, thesis statement, they should use evidence in strengthening their thesis. In relation to argument, evidence refers to facts or testimony that the writers use to support a claim and an argument [18]. Specifically, evidences can be facts (about the topic), examples, personal stories, statistics, expert opinions, comparisons to other situations, and quote from a text on the topic. Inserting the evidences into the essay and keeping them effectively is done through providing evidence that is in line with a point, then elaborate it by using the writers' ideas, stating contradicting evidence and refute that evidence which therefore strengthen the writers' point of views, and quoting information which support the writers' assertion [19]. In this study, the students variedly used quotations, and statistics to support their reasons.

#### Extract C.1

*There are still many students who use time and place as reasons. For example, on the last day of the assignment collection students said there was no good signal in their place or the quota was up. However, even so, for now online learning is still used and is fine. The online learning is different from the school and the usual tutoring institution that requires you to set a certain hour and place to study. Norman (2016, p.1) said that "Studying online allows you to learn flexibly. Because, you can freely choose when and where you want to study, provided you have a gadget that stays connected to the internet. You can choose a place to study at home, cafe, library or others". (Student 5)*

Student 5 in the extract C.1 inserted one quotation in the body paragraph. The quotation is used to strengthen the reasons rebutting the counter argument. Using quote is essential for

advancing the argument and bringing the reader closer to the writers' interpretation and claim [20].

#### Extract C.2

*A few people said that global warming does not adversely affect the ecosystem of animals and plants, but it is actually wrong. Global warming cause extreme weather change and some animals and plants cannot adapt well. The average temperature rise causes many animals to migrate in search of a cooler place. This migration will cause some animals unable to adapt. For example, the white fox migrates then loses to compete with the red fox. This is what increases the risk of extinction in animals. This also occurs in plants. Many plants die because the temperature in the old place has heated up. Many grasses and plants as producers will die, because of that the food supplies for the animal and human will also decrease. (Student 2)*

Student 2 in the extract C.2 added example to support the reasons. This example is appropriate to the reasons which defend the claim.

#### D. Opposition and Refutation

Opposition and refutation are simply disproving an opposing argument. Both are dissimilar with counterargument. Counterargument acknowledges the opposing viewpoints, on the other hand, a refutation presents evidence to contradict the opposing arguments [18]. The collected essays of the students generally revealed that the students had already given refutation against the opposing argument even though they were still weak in doing it.

#### E. Conclusion

In argumentative essay, conclusion is required, and it has significant function to restate and reconfirm the writers' position. It is the last but not the least part of the essay. In this study, many students kept struggling to write a conclusion. They tended to focus on the body of the essay, and they just wanted to accomplish the essay as rapidly as possible. Therefore, they wrote a hasty written conclusion.

#### Extract E.1

*So, diet is not good for all sides. Diet is how to manage your daily diet right. Although reducing the portion of food can also reduce weight significantly but the nutritional intake and nutrients need should be much more attention. On the other side, everyone also needs a different number of calories. Caloric needs are distinguished based on physical activity, condition of health and age. It is better to consume water which can increase the body's metabolism and reduce hunger. So, we do not need a lot of money on diet. (Student 6)*

In extract E.1, it can be seen the conclusion has been written by student 6 which summarized the whole essay. The student also suggested drinking water as a better solution to boost metabolism in burning fat than doing diet. However, the student did not highlight the critical point of view over the claim of the essay.

#### F. Fallacy

Fallacy can be defined as the error in reasoning. Related to nurturing critical thinking, writers should find fallacies in their writing to avoid ambiguous arguments. The fallacies found in the students' argumentative essay are mainly in the form of irrelevance and oversimplification.

## Extract F.1

*However online transportation is preferred because it is guaranteed more security. Users can monitor online transportation reservations with their cell phones. (Student 7)*

In extract F.1, student 7 improperly developed the reasons in supporting the claim. Making fallacies implicitly means that students do not show enough efforts to critically think and examine the argument they confront [14]. It makes the arguments invalid and illogic.

## Extract F.2

*Ever since drugs were outlawed, violence and criminality have gone up. (Student 8)*

This statement is oversimplification because it states that only the banning of consuming drugs has led to increased violence and criminality when in reality it is a combination of several socioeconomic factors.

Additionally, based on the interview and FGD, the students understood the CT elements as each element frequently discussed during teaching and learning process. However, it becomes problematic when they were assigned to create each CT element and formulate them into an enticing argumentative essay. Most students were overwhelmed on distinguishing reason and refutation because they have to state both in the essay, meanwhile a few of them confused in choosing their position. It was also confirmed that making argumentative essay was challenging for them.

## 4 Conclusion

Critical thinking is closely related to the capabilities of the students in creating and composing a written work. It has been investigated that the students' capabilities in constructing claims were satisfactory. The claims were supported by reasoning and refuting towards the opposing arguments. Conversely, somewhat, the students' choice of reasons and evidence deteriorated their arguments. For the conclusion, they restated their claim which showed their position as the writer. Related to fallacies, irrelevance and over simplifications were done the most. The quality of CT elements is dependable on how skillful the students in employing their HOTS. Since the demand of mastering English in this globalization era and the exposure of life time meaningful learning have been strongly forced, CT in argumentative writing crucially needs enchantment.

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