

Students' difficulties in writing an argumentative essay: a qualitative study of EFL learners in a writing class

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to find the students' difficulties in writing argumentative text in a writing classroom. This study was qualitative since it seeks to understand and interpret the meaning that individuals and groups assign to their experiences, interactions, and perceptions. The interview results were also analyzed to conclude and answer the research problem. They study found that students had several difficulties when they wrote their arguments. From the results, there are several difficulties that students may encounter when it comes to writing argumentative essays. They need more time. One of the most significant difficulties students face in writing is a lack of time. Students often have busy schedules, and finding the time to complete writing assignments can be challenging. Limited writing skills is also appears that students who need help with writing skills may find it challenging to express their ideas and opinions clearly and concisely. Poor grammar, syntax, and spelling can also hinder their ability to communicate effectively through writing. Also, anxiety, writing can be a stressful task for some students, particularly those who struggle with anxiety.



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1. INTRODUCTION

This study is aimed to find and understand the students' difficulties in producing argumentative text in a writing classroom. The main reason why this topic is taken into account is dealing with the idea that the most difficult skill to achieve is writing skill. Writing is essential in a classroom as it helps students communicate their ideas effectively and efficiently. Moreover, writing is necessary for academic success as it is a crucial means of assessment (Khalil, 1989). Most examinations and assignments in the classroom require students to write essays, reports, and research papers. Practical writing skills are, therefore, crucial for students to excel in their academic pursuits. In addition, writing promotes creativity and imagination. When students write, they must think outside the box and develop unique and original ideas (Stab & Gurevych, 2014). Writing allows students to explore their imagination and express themselves creatively and originally. This is especially important for students who struggle with verbal communication as it provides a means to express their ideas.

Another benefit of writing in a classroom is that it helps students organize their thoughts and ideas. Writing requires students to structure their ideas logically and coherently. This allows them to develop their organizational skills and improve their ability to express their views clearly. Lastly, writing is an essential tool for self-reflection and personal growth. Through writing, students can reflect on their experiences, evaluate their learning, and identify areas for improvement (Newell et al., 2011). Their process helped students become more self-aware, develop emotional intelligence, and foster personal growth.

The issues or assumptions may vary, starting from argumentative writing, in which the writer presents a claim or proposition and supports it with evidence and reasoning (Mercier, 2016). An argumentative essay aims to persuade the reader to accept the writer's point of view or take a particular course of action. It typically includes an introduction presenting the issue or problem being addressed, a thesis statement stating the writer's position, several body paragraphs explaining evidence and reasoning to support the thesis, and a conclusion summarizing the main points and reiterating the idea. It often also includes counterarguments and rebuttals.

It is good to remember that argumentative writing is different from persuasive. It is more about presenting structured and well evidence-based reasoning to students' arguments rather than convincing someone of their opinion. Argumentative writing is an essential skill often taught in schools as part of the English or Language Arts curriculum. It is a type of writing designed to persuade or convince the reader of a particular point of view (Schneer, 2014). This type of writing is essential because it allows individuals to express their opinions and ideas clearly and logically. It also helps students develop critical thinking skills as students analyze and evaluate different perspectives to make their arguments.

One of the critical components of argumentative writing is the use of evidence. It can include facts, statistics, examples, and expert opinions. The purpose of using evidence is to support the student's argument and to show the readers that the student's point of view is valid. The evidence must be relevant, credible, and sufficient to be effective. Another critical aspect of argumentative writing is the use of logical reasoning. The students must logically present their arguments using inductive and deductive reasoning. Inductive reasoning is when the students show a specific example or piece of evidence, and then they draw a general conclusion from it. The students present a general rule or principle during deductive reasoning and then apply it to a specific situation.

In addition, argumentative writing requires students to be well-informed about the topic they are writing about. This means that the students must do thorough research and be able to present both sides of the argument. This is important because it allows the students to anticipate counterarguments and offer a well-rounded view considering different perspectives. To conclude the above explanation, argumentative writing is an essential skill that enables individuals to express their opinions and ideas clearly and logically. It helps students to increase the way they think of the topic given.

Several studies also take argumentative the topic. As research by (Rahmatunisa, 2014), revealed the problems of the students in writing an argumentative essay. Another investigation by (Zhu, 2001) also investigated the difficulties in argumentative. From those explanations, a prime conclusion may be drawn that writing an argumentative essay is very important to be always done continuously and consistently since the results of the students' argumentative essays were not good and tend to lack of valid and appropriate arguments. The formulation of this study is arranged as follows: (1) what are the students' difficulties in writing argumentative writing? (2) How should the students overcome the difficulties in writing argumentative essays? This study tried to uncover the students' difficulties when they wrote an argumentative essay.

The potential gap that can be considered within this research is about lack of research on students perspectives. Most of the existing literature focuses on identifying difficulties based on researcher's observations or assessments. However, understanding the students' own perspectives and experiences can provide valuable insights. Conducting interviews, surveys, or incorporating reflective writing from students themselves can provide a more comprehensive understanding of their difficulties in producing argumentative texts. It is also rarely studies that have limited focus

on specific difficulties. It identifies the specific areas of difficulty will help provide targeted strategies for improvement.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study was qualitative since this research understands and interprets the meaning that individuals and groups assign to their experiences, interactions, and perceptions. It investigates a phenomenon of particular people, setting to record in its natural setting/ It was a comprehensive approach that involved collecting data through different methods such as interviews, observations and document analysis. The data of this study were obtained from university students' writing and interview.

2.1. Participants

The participants of this study were the students who are joining writing class. They were in fifth semester. They were about 22 students consisting of 18 females and four males. The age range was 20 to 21 years old.

2.2. Data collection tools

They were several tools used by the researcher to collect the data. The first was an observation sheet to write down important information in the classroom. The observation sheet contains several points including the activity and also the notes. Second was the interview consisting of unstructured questions delivered to the students after the class. This interview contains several questions including: do you have any difficulties writing good essays; how did you learn to write at school, and how did it differ from how you learned to write in university; how do I attach my content; discuss how you tried to show that your essay's topic is connected; could you please write a conclusion paragraph.

2.3. Data analysis procedure

An inductive way was used to analyse the data taken. The result of the observation activity was analysed carefully, and the two aspects, such as description and reflection were investigated. In the illustration, the researcher depicted all the things she looked at. On the other hand, she tried to relate to the observation results in the reflection. The results of the interview were also analysed to draw a conclusion and answer the research problem.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As it is stated in research method, an observation was done to know the proses of how students produce the argumentative writing in the classroom. During the writing class observation, the focus was on the student's engagement in producing argumentative texts. The class consisted of approximately 27 students, ranging in age from 21-22 years old/ the observation took place in a well-lit and spacious classroom with desks arranged in small groups to facilitate collaboration.

1. Classroom setup and atmosphere

The classroom environment was conducive to writing, with minimal distractions and calm atmosphere. The wall displayed relevant writing resources, such as posters highlighting the structure of an argumentative essay and examples of strong argumentative.

2. Teacher's instructional strategies

The teacher began the class by providing a brief overview of argumentative writing, emphasizing the importance of clear reasoning and evidence. The teacher then introduces a real-world issue for the write about, ensuring its relevance to their lives and interests. The topic was presented in a thought-provoking manner, sparking students' curiosity and encouraging active participation.

3. Student engagement and interaction

The observation revealed a high level of students' engagement during the writing activity. Students were seen actively discussing the topic with their peers, brainstorming ideas, and sharing personal experiences related to the issue. The small group arrangement facilitated collaboration and enabled students to exchange perspectives and challenge each other's viewpoints in a respectful manner.

4. Use of writing tools and resources

Students were provided with graphic organizers, writing prompts, and access to relevant research materials to support their argumentative writing. The students utilized these resources effectively, referring to them while structuring their arguments and selecting appropriate evidence. Some students also used laptops or tablets to conduct additional online research to enhance the depth of their arguments.

5. Teacher's support and feedback

The teacher circulated the classroom, offering individualized guidance and support to students. The teacher provided timely feedback students' writing, addressing specific areas of improvement related to argument structure, clarity of reasoning, and use of evidence. The feedback was constructive and aimed at enhancing students critical thinking and writing skills.

Overall, the observation indicated a positive and productive writing classroom environment. Students actively participated in the argumentative writing process, demonstrating strong engagement, collaboration, and critical thinking skills. The teachers' instructional strategies and provision of relevant resources effectively supported students' development of argumentative writing abilities.

Argumentative writing is a type of academic writing that requires the writer to present their opinion on a particular topic, issue, or idea and defend it using relevant evidence and logical reasoning, writing an argumentative essay can be challenging for students but with the right approach and guidelines, and they can write a compelling piece of writing that engages readers and convinces them of their viewpoint. Here are the students' essays when they were given certain topics and asked to write their opinions. The tables below show both the students' answers to the questions presented and the student's results in writing an argumentative essay about social media.

Table 1. A Sample of an Interview Script for Students that is Semi-Structured

Q: Do you have any difficulties writing good essays?

A: Time is a challenge since we could avoid mistakes with more time. Some activities are not tough; we simply need to concentrate and focus on avoiding them. There are a few minor errors that need to be corrected.

Q: How did you learn to write at school, and how did it differ from how you learned to write in university?

A: This was one of the difficulties I encountered when I first began studying writing. This is due to the fact that the level of English we studied in school was. I don't think it's any different. However, it's quite low. There appears to be a significant improvement in English proficiency at school. .

Q: Describe how you organized this essay?

Q: How do I attach my content? Discuss how you tried to show that your essay's topic is connected.

A: I attempted to have all of the paragraph's flow together. I need to know what I'm going to say in the introduction... or I'm trying to catch an idea that's related to the topic and in general...so coherence hear maybe most of the time I think sentences in the beginning of the introduction don't need to use the tense v. well, but here I use are compelled, which means it's passive.

Q: What are body paragraphs?

Q: Could you please write a conclusion paragraph?

Q: What is your thesis statement?

A: In the thesis statement, we need to employ the tense that shows we're talking in general, but also attempting to let the reader understand what we're trying to communicate.

Q: What is the topic sentence of each paragraph in the body?

Q: Can you tell me how you related your sentences in your essay?

Q: What is the last sentence in each body paragraph?

Q: Did your knowledge of the essay topic's subject area assist you in making your essay more cohesive and connected?

A: Sometimes, for example, we are given a topic and are required to offer three reasons why we agree or disagree...for or against... But there were occasions when we didn't... We couldn't find like three arguments or three reasons... maybe because of a lack of information or maybe because we didn't have a background... so we have two or maybe one... so we have to... like we're in exams... we're like geared about our grades... sometimes when we're not interested in a topic, we can't think about it very much... so we have to...

From the results, there are several difficulties that students may encounter when it comes to writing argumentative essays. They need more time. One of the most significant difficulties students face in writing is a lack of time. Students often have busy schedules, and finding the time to complete writing assignments can be challenging (Fahma et al., 2022). Secondly, writer's block. Writer's block is another common difficulty that the students face. It can be challenging to come up with ideas or to organize thoughts and arguments in a coherent manner. Limited writing skills is also appearing that students who need help with writing skills may find it challenging to express their ideas and opinions clearly and concisely. Poor grammar, syntax, and spelling can also hinder their ability to communicate effectively through writing.

Also, anxiety, writing can be a stressful task for some students, particularly those who struggle with anxiety. Fear of failure or criticism can make starting or completing writing assignments challenging. Lack of motivation happens when students may also work with writing if they lack motivation or interest in the topic (Mercier & Sperber, 2013). It can be challenging to stay focused and engaged when the subject matter needs to be more compelling. Last but not least is dealing with language difficulty; writing in a foreign language can be a significant barrier. They may struggle with grammar and syntax. Making it challenging to communicate their ideas effectively. Those things happened differently to each student. But the things that should be highlighted is that the students' difficulties when asked to develop a certain topic with their original ideas may become a disaster for them (Putri & Ahmad, 2022).

Table 2. A sample of student's argumentative essay

The Impact of social media Instagram on Students' Behavior

Social media is something that has many impacts on students' behavior. One of the social media is Instagram. Instagram has an impact positive and negative for students' behavior.

Students using Instagram as media to learn something new and to increase their knowledge about the world with Instagram. But, in the other side, there are some students using Instagram just for fun and does not get the utilization of it.

Media abuse in students, it has many negative impacts. Especially on students' behavior. The social media can change and make a student have a bad behavior. Not only for own self, but also on their family and their daily life. It will make them be introvert person.

So, Instagram has many impacts on students' behavior, not only negative, but also positive impact. Overall is good, when student using Instagram for learn something new and it will has utilization from it. But, when student abuse of Instagram, it will have a negative impact from it.

From the result, it can be seen that the student already had two sides to discuss. She mentioned the positive side and the negative ones. Unfortunately, she didn't explain the claim more by using the counterarguments by giving real examples. The topic has already been up to date with the students, but it seemed difficult to develop the essay. Overall, their writing difficulties were complex and multifaceted, but with practice and support, these obstacles can be overcome. There

are several ways to take easily on how students should write argumentative writing based on the observation done in the classroom. Choose a topic: the first step in writing an argumentative essay is to select a topic. Choose a topic that the students are passionate about, and that has sufficient research material available (Liu & Braine, 2005). The students also need to consider the audience they are writing for and the essay's purpose. Ensure that the topic is debatable and has two or more opposing viewpoints. Next is research: conduct thorough research on the topic before start writing. Use credible sources such as academic journals, books and reputable websites to gather evidence to support the arguments. Take note of the main ideas and counterarguments and evaluate the credibility of the sources.

In addition, (Sundari & Febriyanti, 2021) also agree that develop a thesis statement is also important. The thesis statement is the main argument students will defend in the essay. It should be clear, concise, and debatable, ensure that the thesis statement reflects their stance on the topic and the main points that they will be discussing in their essay. Organize the essay: a well-organized essay is easier to read and understand. Create an outline of the argumentative essay, including the introduction, body, and conclusion. The introduction should provide background information on the topic, the thesis statement, and the essay's purpose. The essay's body should present the students' arguments and counterarguments, supported by evidence. The conclusion should summarize the main points and restate the thesis statement.

Then, use logical reasoning: logical reasoning is crucial in argumentative writing. Ensure that the arguments are based on facts, statistics, and logical reasoning rather than emotions. Use transitional words and phrases to connect the ideas and make the writing flow smoothly. Use persuasive language: use persuasive language to convince the reader about the viewpoint. Use strong, clear, and concise language to present the arguments and counterarguments. Avoid using vague or ambiguous language that may confuse the reader. Address counterargument: addressing counterarguments strengthens the arguments and shows that the students have considered multiple perspectives. Acknowledge opposing viewpoints and provide evidence to support their stance. Refute opposing arguments with logic and evidence rather than emotions. Edit and revise: once the students complete the essay, they need to take time to edit and change. Ensure the essay is free of grammatical errors, spelling, and typos. Read the essay aloud to ensure that it flows smoothly and makes sense. It is also important to seek feedback from peers or a teacher to improve the students' writing.

When it is compared to the previous study by (Rahmatunisa, 2014) that she divided into three categories such as linguistics problems, cognitive problems, and psychological problems. This research elaborated the problems into those three categories. Since the result of this study only focus on the result of classroom observation and students' interview and the difficulties derived from both of them are around The difficulties were around the lack of time, busy schedules and they feel difficult to express their ideas. Those things were quite different but also similar with what found in the previous study.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, since this article has its own limitation only in writing class especially writing argumentative text, it can be concluded that writing an argumentative essay is challenging, and students must learn how to write them effectively to succeed in their academic endeavors. Writing argumentative requires careful planning, research, and logical reasoning, and it takes much time to make them accurate. The student's difficulties indicated that the six problems came up with the observation and interview with the students. The most powerful thing that must be fixed is the motivation itself. Students need to love the writing process since it influences how they do something. And for the tips offered also come up from the observation in the classroom. Argumentative is a challenging essay to write. Students need to stay focused and valid with their arguments. Also, teachers must constantly give feedback on their students' processes to build a positive writing environment. Finally, for the suggestion that may be useful for students is they need to strengthen the four language skills well. Students need to make priority of what should they

do by always practicing to write effectively and precisely. Meanwhile, for the teacher, it is better to identify the preferences and learning styles for the students including what is best for them and matched with the purpose of writing class itself.

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