ANALYZING ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING OF EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to analyze how the third-semester students of the English Education Study Program of Widya Mandira Catholic University structured their writings based on the generic structures and language features of argumentative writing. A qualitative descriptive method was used in this study. The findings revealed the most common problem was the absence of counterarguments, which was found in the writings of 24 students (80%). There was also a problem of merging the generic structures, which was done by 14 students (46.67%). In correlation to this, 11 students (36.67%) contained weak and unclear conclusions in their writings. Another problem found was the lack of formal tone, where 13 students (43.33%) still used casual and informal phrases, and they showed subjective and informal attitude towards the topics. Errors of omission, addition, misformation, and misordering were also found in 14 students' writings (46.67%). Misformation was the most frequently found with the total of 28 errors (45.16%), followed by omission with the total of 24 errors (38.71%), addition with the total of 7 errors (11.29%), and misordering with the total of 3 errors (4.84%), These findings suggest that simply assigning argumentative essays is not enough and there need to be more explicit guidance in structure, academic style, as well as grammar.

Keywords: Argumentative writing, generic structures, language features, error analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Writing is a skill that has to be learned for written communication or academic purposes (Toba et al., 2019), from which it leads us to academic success (Permata & Hamzah, 2019). At universities especially, writing becomes one of the most complex tasks we encounter, and that it plays a crucial role in our language development (Campbell, 2019). In this context, academic writing holds one of the most commonly found types of

writing, which is argumentative. This type of writing requires us to take a position on a controversial issue and give reasons and supporting evidences to convince our readers to accept our position (Ramadhani & Ahmad, 2022). In this practice, there needs to be taken into account the ability to compose a convincing and well-organized essay, as it compels us to hone critical thinking, communication, and persuasive skills (Nazhifah et al., 2024). Furthermore, in composing an argumentative essay, there are two important criteria that we must consider: the generic structures and the language features.

Folse et al. (2014) argued that, regarding the generic structures, a writer must begin with an introduction in which a thesis statement is clearly stated, and that it must be in a form of an argument that can create two opposing viewpoints. These opposing viewpoints are called a pro argument and a counterargument, which are further developed as the body paragraphs for an argumentative essay. In writing the counterargument, a refutation or a rebuttal must also be written to oppose the counterargument. Thereafter, a conclusion is written in which it consists of a restated thesis statement, and that we also restate in general terms the main ideas that have been gathered in defense of the said thesis statement.

Whereas, Tan (2003), as cited in Rahayu (2023), argued that, commonly, present tense is used in an argumentative essay to state facts or general ideas, although sometimes past or future tense is also used depending on the context given. Not only that, clarity especially in argumentative writing is crucial so that ideas can be conveyed clearly and logically, which is done through effective choice and placement of words in a sentence. Most importantly, the tone in an argumentative essay must be sufficiently formal as appropriate an academic essay, as it refers to writer's attitude towards the subject, which should be appropriate for the formal and persuasive nature of argumentative writing.

Despite the explanations above, Nazhifah et al. (2024) has stated that, as shown by many studies, argumentative writing becomes the most complex type of essay among all other types. This statement is in accordance with the researcher's experience as a student of Widya Mandira Catholic University, which the researcher, being a fourth-semester student when taking an argumentative writing course, struggled much in conveying the researcher's ideas in a way that was well thought out and organized.

For third-semester students who are still early in their academic journey, this challenge may prove even greater. Positioned between beginner and more advanced levels of academic writing, third-semester students are expected to start applying principles of argumentative writing, but their skills are, quite possibly, not yet fully developed. This raises the question of whether or not they can successfully handle the demands required in writing an argumentative essay.

At this stage, it is important as the researcher believes, to look at both errors and structures together. Drawing on the Complexity–Accuracy–Fluency (CAF) framework (Skehan, 1998; Housen et al., 2012), writing ability can be seen as multidimensional, with accuracy and complexity closely affecting each other. This is especially crucial in argumentative writing, which requires both correct language and well-developed, clearly organized ideas. For

third-semester students, whose skills are still growing
but already tested by demanding tasks like argumentative essays, analyzing errors and structures separately would give only a partial picture. Looking at them together provides a fuller understanding of how language and organization interact in their essays.

A previous study was conducted by Djehatu et al. (2022). Using a descriptive qualitative method, this research aimed to identify the types of texts produced by students, analyze their constructions, and investigate common writing problems. The results showed that while some students could write effectively, others still encountered difficulties. They faced challenges such as transferring ideas into text, limited vocabulary, grammatical errors, difficulty to start writing, lack of reading sources, weak organization, and inconsistency in developing ideas. However, the study focused on text types such as narrative, descriptive, recount, comparison/contrast, cause–effect, and expository, without specific emphasis on argumentative writing.

Despite this, some previous studies related to the use of argumentative text have been conducted in other universities, such as Puspita (2021) who conducted a study entitled "An Analysis of Students' Grammatical Error in Argumentative Writing in one of Private Universities in Garut", Ramadhani and Ahmad (2022) who conducted a study entitled "An Analysis of Students' Argumentative Essay Writing Skill of Third Semester of English Language Education-UIR", and Hasanah and colleagues (2023) who conducted a study entitled "An Analysis of Grammatical Error in Argumentative Essay of Fourth Semester Students of English Education Department of Universitas Islam Malang."

These studies highlight the importance of focusing on argumentative writing. However, they appear to primarily address grammar and general writing ability, and they do not specifically analyze two essential elements of argumentative writing: the use of a formal academic tone and the inclusion of structure such as counterarguments. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no study in the context of Widya Mandira Catholic University has examined these two aspects together, even though they are central to the effectiveness of argumentative writing.

Reflecting on these concerns, the present research intends to examine how third-semester students of the English Education Study Program at Widya Mandira Catholic University structure their argumentative essays and what kinds of errors they produce in terms of both generic structure and language features. By focusing on the condition of a novice tertiary level students dealing with an advanced academic writing, this study seeks to provide valuable insights into the specific challenges faced by students as they develop the skills necessary for effective argumentative writing.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach, combining the strengths of the qualitative and descriptive methods. A qualitative method is used to represent non-numerical data, focusing on understanding phenomena related to feelings, perceptions, and emotions (Karunarathna et al., 2024). A descriptive method is used to explain events and

situations exactly during their current status, providing a systematic examination of phenomena (Taherdoost, 2022). Drawing from both approaches, a qualitative descriptive method was used in this study. This method refers to the detailed, straightforward, and rich description of experiences or events, maintaining a close proximity to the data which prioritizes factual description over theoretical analysis or abstract concepts (Hall & Liebenberg, 2024). This method was used with the intention of getting a better understanding of students' ability in argumentative writing, and to describe the conditions and problems they face in writing argumentative essays.

To collect the data, the researcher consulted with the lecturer responsible for teaching argumentative writing to the third-semester students of the English Education Study Program at Widya Mandira Catholic University Kupang during the 2024/2025 academic year. Thirty students were then asked to complete a writing test, where they could choose one topic from several options. They were free to take a stance (supporting or opposing) on their chosen topic and construct arguments consistent with their position. The available topics included: "Governments should allocate a larger portion of their budget to education than to defense," "Extending school hours improves student academic performance," "Using online platforms for homework submission is more efficient than traditional methods," "Standardized testing should be a key factor in college admissions decisions," and "Arts education is as important as science and mathematics education." The students were given two hours to complete their essays in class and were

reminded to include elements that would later be analyzed.

The decision to use a timed writing test in this study was based on the need to obtain authentic samples of students' argumentative writing. The time limit also ensured that all students worked within the same constraints, to which it reduces the likelihood of outside assistance and enables a fairer comparison of writing performance. This also reflected real academic contexts, as students are expected to manage time effectively, such as in-class essays or examinations. However, having considered it, this method can also serve some limitations. There is a possibility for time constraints to increase anxiety and pressure, which might negatively influence writing quality and result in errors that might not appear in untimed assignments. Additionally, because the task was conducted only once, it may offer a limited picture of students' broader writing competence.

Regardless, having collected the data, the researcher analyzed the essays in three main steps. First, each essay was read carefully to identify the presence of generic structures (introduction, pro argument, counterargument, refutation, rebuttal, and conclusion) and language features commonly used in argumentative writing (tenses, clarity, and tone), with the presence or absence of each element recorded for every student. Second, all errors were identified and coded according to Dulay's Surface Strategy Taxonomy (1982), which categorizes errors into four types: omission, addition, misinformation, and misordering. For instance, missing an article was marked as an omission, while inserting an unnecessary word was considered an

addition. Each error was noted in the text and documented separately. Finally, the frequency of each generic structure, language feature, and error type was calculated and converted into percentages using the formula proposed by Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005), as cited in Safitri (2022): $P = (f / n) \times 100$, where P is the percentage, f is the frequency, and n is the total number. Although this is a qualitative study, percentages were used to make patterns in the data easier to recognize. It served to support and clarify the descriptive findings, helping to organize the results and deepen the overall interpretation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
Generic Structures

The findings on the generic structures of argumentative writing showed that all students clearly presented their thesis statements. However, while most provided strong supporting arguments, they did not adequately balance their essays with counterarguments. Only 6 of the 30 students (20%) included counterarguments. Additionally, 14 students (46.67%) combi--ned structures incorrectly: 6 (20%) merged the thesis with supporting arguments, 1 (3.33%) combined the counterargument with the conclusion, and 8 (26.67%) merged all structures into a single paragraph. Furthermore, 11 students (36.67%) wrote unclear or weak conclusions, failing to restate the thesis or summarize key arguments.

One student, however, produced a fairly adequate essay. Although this essay still merged the thesis with supporting arguments and missed some essential structures, it was considered the closest to meeting the criteria for argumentative writing. Below is the essay written by this student:

Governments Should Allocate a Higher Percentage of Their Budgets to Education than to Defense

*(**TS**) Governments play a pivotal role in shaping the future, and allocating a larger proportion of their budgets to education rather than defense is paramount. Education is the bedrock upon which societies thrive and evolve. (**PA**) By prioritizing education funding, governments invest in their citizens' intellectual growth and skill development, fostering a more knowledgeable and innovative populace. (**PA**) A well-educated society is better equipped to tackle complex challenges, boost economic growth, and promote social cohesion.*

*(**CA**) While defense is crucial for safeguarding a nation, (**Rn**) a disproportionate emphasis on military spending can impede long-term progress. (**Rl**) Redirecting funds towards education would nurture talents, cultivate critical thinking, and bridge socio-economic gaps. Education empowers individuals, providing them with tools to contribute meaningfully to society, ultimately fostering peace and stability from within.*

*(**C**), (**RT**) In conclusion, channeling more resources into education rather than defense is a strategic investment that yields far-reaching benefits. It lays the foundation for progress, empowers individuals, and fosters a more prosperous and harmonious society.* In this essay, the thesis statement (**TS**) was clearly stated, which was then followed by some supporting sentences. Two of these sentences the researcher considered pro arguments (**PA**) because each of them could apparently be divided and converted into a topic sentence for a paragraph.

The sentence "*While defense is crucial for safeguarding a nation,…*" was closest to a counterargument (**CA**), which, as the writer considered, could be revised, as in "*While it might be true that defense is crucial for safeguarding a nation,..*". In response, the sentence "*a disproportionate emphasis on military spending can impede long-term progress*" became the refutation that opposed the said counterargument. Meanwhile, the sentence "*Redirecting funds towards education would nurture talents, cultivate critical thinking, and bridge socio-economic gaps*" seemed closets to a rebuttal (**Rl**).

Lastly, for the conclusion (**C**), the sentence "*…channeling more resources into education rather than defense is a strategic investment that yields far- reaching benefits*" restated the thesis statement (**RT**) quiet well.

Language Features

It was revealed that most students demonstrated an understanding of tense usage, as they managed to apply the rules and contexts correctly. However, a small number of students (9 out of 30, or 30%) occasionally struggled with using the present, past, and future tenses accurately. Examples of these errors are shown in the table below:

Table 1. The use of Tenses in students' Writings

Types of Tense	Examples of Incorrect Sentences
Present	Because Art helping someone in training the left and right brain. School has an important role in formal education.
Future	Creativity created will be arouse comfortable atmosphere or place. Study room creative will be aroused spirit someone to learn.
Past	It was proven that many students were very happy and enthusiastic in doing their assignments. And through that method, we can learn many new things that we never knew about it before, especially carrying out tasks using technology. I started to develop a little until recently because of a lot of practice and study.

As shown in the table above, several errors were found in verb usage. In the present tense, for example, the verb *"help"* was incorrectly written with the –ing form instead of the –s form. Similarly, the verb *"have"* was not inflected with –s in the third person singular context. In the future tense, two sentences contained an unnecessary insertion of *"be"* between the auxiliary *"will"* and the main verb *"arouse."*

For the past tense, the first sentence showed inconsistency by using *"can"* instead of its past form *"could."* Moreover, past tense generally requires a time marker (e.g., *yesterday, last night*). In the second sentence, the phrase *"until recently"* indicated an action continuing from the past to a recent point, which would be better expressed with the present perfect tense.

Regarding clarity, most students conveyed ideas clearly and logically. However, 8 students (26.67%) failed to do so, mainly due to frequent grammatical errors, overly long sentences, and issues with punctuation, capitalization, or spelling. These problems disrupted clarity, caused ambiguity, and made the texts harder to follow. The following table presents examples of unclear sentences as described above.

Table 2. Sentences in the Students' Writings that Disrupted Clarity

Students	Examples sentences
ST1	Apart from that not all students are good at math and science some of them may be better at art lessons example of a student who is not good at counting but he won the drawing competition between classes, there is also a possible worse than that almost all subjects he is very weak but good at martial arts and can represent his school to follow the martial arts race to the National level.

ST2	Four things we need to know in Finland the teaching. Profession is highly paid their basic education is free, libraries are spread overy where and Finally The state provides borofits to pregnant mothers until their child is 17 years old.

The first student's sentence contained multiple ideas that should have been divided into several shorter sentences. Instead, they were combined into one long sentence, making it hard to follow due to missing punctuation such as commas and periods.

The second student's sentence had numerous errors that hindered comprehension. Although it was intended as an enumerative sentence, the errors made its meaning unclear, especially at first glance.

Of the 30 students, 17 (56.67%) used a formal tone, presenting objective arguments and expressing confident, persuasive claims. In contrast, 13 students (43.33%) wrote with a less formal tone, using casual phrases and showing subjective or informal attitudes toward the topic. The following table presents examples of sentences that lacked the formality required in argumentative writing.

Table 3. Students' Sentences that Lacked Formality

Students	Examples sentences
ST1	Students will definitely get bored if they only study all day, so with this extension of school hours, students will definitely have more time at school and other outside activities will definitely be hindered
ST2	If you don't know a basic math that's impossible for you to be a professional artist and all the thing you learn about art is just gonna useless.

The first sentence was not overly informal. However, its conversational tone was quite evident due the repetition of the word "*definitely*". The second sentence, meanwhile, was especially subjective. It was also too informal and conversational. This was especially proven by the use of the word "*gonna*", which was very inappropriate for an argumentative essay.

Discussions
In this section, the researcher discusses the findings by summarizing the key points and interpreting their meanings and implications. This section is divided into three parts: (1) students' ability in composing the generic structures of argumentative writing, (2) the correlation of clarity and tenses with error analysis in students' writings, and (3) the correlation of tone with the absence of counterarguments in students' writings.

Students' Ability in Structuring Their Essays
As in line with the findings regarding the generic structures above, students' essays contained incomplete generic structures, with 80% omitting counterarguments, 46.67% merging one structure with another, and 36.67% producing weak or unclear conclusions. For example in an essay about the importance of art education and mathemics, student didn't summarize the key reasons for her

standpoint well, and it failed to leave a final strong impression. This shows that students did not meet the criteria that were expected in composing an argumentative essay.

Prananda (2016) argued that an effective argumentative essay requires both essay organization (introduction, body with pro and counterarguments, and conclusion) and paragraph organization (topic sentences, supporting details, and concluding sentences). The current findings, however, revealed that many students could not meet these criteria. While Prananda studied sixth-semester students, Ramadhani and Ahmad (2022) showed that even third-semester students were able to structure their essays well, which suggests that proficiency level alone may not determine students' writing competence.

A possible explanation would be the time constraint applied in this study, which might have limited students' ability to well compose argumentative essays as expected. Yet, Ramadhani and Ahmad (2022) found that their students, under similar time restrictions, still performed considerably well. This suggested that there might be a problem with the teaching of argumentative writing itself. In line, a similar concern was noted by Seyoum (2022), who found that inappropriate teaching methods is among one the main factors hindering students' ability to apply argumentative writing strategies. Thus, this concludes that structural weaknesses in essays are often linked not only to learners' abilities but also to instructional factors.

The Correlation of Tenses and Clarity with Error Analysis in Students' Writings

The findings showed that 30% of students misused tenses and 26.67% produced unclear sentences. Additionally, 14 out of 30 students (46.67%) made grammatical errors, while 16 students (53.33%) produced error-free essays. Among the 62 total errors identified, misformation accounted for 45.16% (28 errors), omission for 38.71% (24 errors), addition for 11.62% (7 errors), and misordering for 4.84% (3 errors). For example, a typical misformation was the use of -*s* in verb forms ("Art have some meaning" instead of "Art has some meaning"), while omission errors often involved missing preposition ("I was still high school" instead of "I was still in high school").

These findings align with with the findings from Hasanah et al. (2023), who also identified misformation as the most common type of error (31%), followed by omission (24%), addition (24%), and misordering (21%). However, while Hasanah et al. found that misformation occured mainly due to the misuse of complementary structures, the present study found that misspelling was the main source for this error type, which points to vocabulary gaps and limited grammar knowledge at this level. These results also align with broader EFL research showing that learners' grammatical accuracy strongly affects clarity (e.g., Bhela, 1999; Darus & Subramaniam, 2009), since errors not only obscure meaning but also reduce the persuasiveness of arguments.

Still however, the current study both confirms earlier findings about the common occurence of misformation errors and extends them by highlighting spelling-related misformations as an issue that can occur among Indonesian tertiary-level learners, mainly at their novice stage.

The Correlation of Tone with the Absence of Counterarguments in Students' Writings

The findings regarding tone showed that 43% of students still applied informal and conversational expressions such as "I think" or "in my opinion." The inclusion of informal tone in students' essays, as it was observed, tended to lead to the use of subjective opinions without consideration to the opposing viewpoints, to which it correlated with the 80% absence of counterarguments. For example, in one essay on the use of online and offline platforms for submitting homeworks, a student focused only on personal views and experiences without addressing any counterarguments.

This result is consistent with Oktavia (2016), who reported that students tended to focus more on personal standpoints while neglecting opposing arguments, which grounded their essays in personal experiences rather than objective reasoning. Similarly, Pujiastuti et al. (2022) identified low reading motivation and difficulties with complex texts as major barriers to students' ability to construct balanced arguments. Conversely, Prayogi et al. (2023) demonstrated that reading activities such as analyzing argumentative essay components and paraphrasing lead to deeper comprehension, logical organization, and more formal language use.

Taken together, these studies suggest that both tone and counterargument use are influenced by reading habits and exposure to academic discourse. The current study supports this claim, showing that the lack of counterarguments and informal tone in students' writing reflect insufficient engagement with academic texts. This concludes that without enough reading input, students tend to lean toward conversational tone and subjective reasoning, undermining both the persuasiveness and objectivity of their essays.

CONCLUSION

Issues in the context of argumetative writing appear to not only come from students' competencies themselves, but also from instructional factors such as teaching practice. In spite of this, students' lack of competencies presents a number of serious problems. To begin with, the frequent absence of counterargument, the merging of generic structures, and underdeveloped conclusions suggest a lack of understanding of structures of argumentative essay. Students' lack of reading and unfamiliarity with academic writing seems to be the factors of their tendency to use informal and subjective arguments in their essays. Moreover, grammatical errors concerning verb tense and sentence structure, and other errors concerning punctuation and spelling are among the factors disrupting clarity and persuasiveness. These issues suggest that simply assigning argumentative essay is not enough, as students still require support in their writing and even reading.

Therefore, to address these challenges, some things need to be taken into account. More focus on the components of argumentative essay should be addressed, specifically when it comes to the inclusion of counterarguments. Students must also be reminded with the importance of formal, academic tone and objective language, whilst avoiding the use informal and subjective ones. Priority in grammar,

moreover, should also be addressed, which can be overcome by applying, for example, peer-review or self-correction through guided error analysis, which can further support the development of clarity. Not only that, practical strategies such as writing outlines using checklists or structured reading-to-write tasks, for instance, can also further support the development of organization. To conclude, helping students to become more competent academic writers, or argumentative writers in this context, requires building a deeper understanding of academic writing as a process based on clear thinking and structured reasoning.

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