
ARGUMENTATIVE ELEMENTS AND QUALITY OF MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS' WRITING

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Abstract

As multilingual learners who have an array of linguistic and cognitive skills, Indonesian students have been exposed to various learning experiences intended to improve their metalinguistic awareness. They are expected to possess integrated competence of languages learnt. In light with this, this paper aims at analyzing students' argumentative elements produced in their English argumentative writing, evaluating how far these elements contribute to the overall quality of their writing, and considering the influence of their status as multilingual learners. The result reveals that the students' way in structuring their arguments influenced the quality of their writing. The developed writing were mostly produced by the students who were able to provide the equal weight of defending arguments and counter arguments which were elaborated in multiple arguments. Furthermore, since providing proper elaboration for the counterarguments was one of major problems in the students' argumentative writing, the strategies to integrate arguments with counterarguments were also presented.

Keywords: *argumentative elements, argumentative writing, multilingual learners*

1. INTRODUCTION

For a couple of years, argumentative essay has been considered as the most complex mode compared to other types of essays for both lecturers and students. Moreover, most students also encountered many problems dealing with argumentative writing rather than narrative, descriptive, or expository writing. McCann (1989) explains that this condition is triggered by the fact that most students feel unable to learn the feature of formal argument from their daily oral interchange as they learn to use narrative for telling story. Aside from it, he further states the condition in which students are able to present their ideas and point of views, but they commonly unable to support their points beyond general statement and personal opinion. Thus, argumentative writing remains difficult for some students.

Based on the interviews conducted to both lecturers and students in order to acquire information related to writing ability of English Department students of UNP, it was found out that most students get dissatisfying scores in Essay Writing. Among 200 students taking Essay Writing in 2013/2014 academic year, 15 of them got A, 73 got B, 67 got C, 36 got D, and 9 of them got E. This result indicates that the students' ability in composing argumentative essays is still far from satisfactory. Regarding the students, they stated that they mostly have difficulties dealing with writing argumentative essays. These obstacles are mainly related to their lack of ability to attain and develop persuasive ideas, and also their inadequate comprehension with the issues discussed. In addition, the interview result also revealed that most of the students tended to focus on the accuracy of grammar in their writings, and they did not know the criteria of good arguments and how to make them convincing.

This paper examines the students' ability in writing argumentative essays. The argumentative elements occurred in students' essays were also analyzed in order to obtain a deeper understanding on how the students developed and elaborated their arguments. In addition to recognizing types of argumentation produced by the students and how significant their arguments contributed to overall quality of students' essays, the strategies for solving the mostly appeared problems are also presented.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED THEORIES

Argumentative writing is a type of writing which requires writers to provide arguments in order to support a position they hold. Reid (2000) explains that argumentative writing is one of genres which calls for students to process information deeply, then construct the relationship among ideas by considering diverging point of views. In addition, Walton (2006) argues that argumentative writing is a form of factual writing which can help students to improve their critical thinking skill, and it will be beneficial for them to explore and challenge social reality.

Based on Michigan Writing assessment Guide as stated in Weigle (2002), there are three components considered in assessing students' argumentative essays. *First*, idea and argument is the main thing to consider in assessing students' writing. Writers cannot expect that all of their readers will have the same knowledge and understanding as theirs. That is the reason why writers should be clear with not only what to say but also how to say it. Therefore, everything stated can be comprehended easily by readers (Mayberry, 2009). Groarke and Tindale (2004) state that one common problem mostly encountered by writers is the tendency to overstate a claim; that is, to claim more than what they can support. This condition can weaken the argument itself. Thus, from the very beginning, writers should mention clearly their stand towards the issue discussed.

Furthermore, Mayberry (2009) asserts that an adequate support is one of other factors that determine whether an argument is considered strong or weak. An adequate support here is not simply a statement of certain views, but an attempt to support those views with acceptable reasons. Weston (1992) proposes several ways to support a claim: arguments by example, arguments by analogy, arguments from authority, and causal arguments.

Another aspect of good ideas and arguments is related to objectivity. Groarke and Tindale (2004) explain that there are two points that should be considered by writers in stating their arguments. An issue can be arguable if there are two points of view that can be dealt with by writers. Therefore, the first consideration is related to arguments from your opponents called counter arguments. To produce convincing arguments, writers should not only concern about the strongest point of their claim, but also consider opponents' views and show how their views could be tackled by writers' arguments. In other words, writers ought to both build their own case and break their opponent's case. Mayberry (2009) elaborates that writers can identify counterarguments without directly refuting it. This strategy is used to show audience or readers that writers know the complexity of the issue. So, it can give a kind of impression that writers are those who are reasonable and broad-minded.

Second, quality of an argumentative essay is also determined by the rhetorical features used in developing arguments. These arguments must be put in logical order in terms of both strengths and dependency. Groarke and Tindale (2004) claim that the arguments will be more convincing if the strongest point is provided at the beginning of writing. It is aimed at capturing readers' attention together with their conviction more easily. In addition, Mayberry (2009) mentions that this strategy will be favorable to gain some early agreement from audience. After that, if the points presented depend on each other, writers should show that dependency clearly, so that those points can make sense to the readers.

Third, though grammar and vocabulary should not be taught in isolation, they still become important parts in order to analyze and assess the quality of students' writing. Jago (2005) conveys that encouraging students to just put down ideas on paper without concerning for anything including grammar and usage will bring more harm than good to students since they are apt to focus on content and end up with producing many grammatical errors. Langan (2012) further elaborates that errors in fragments and run-ons are two most common sentence-skills mistakes in students' writing. Thus, it is important for teacher to identify these errors to avoid students continually repeat their mistake.

In order to get an in-depth comprehension of students' strengths and weaknesses in advancing arguments, their argumentative elements also need to be analyzed. Arguments are delivered in order to defense a standpoint. In his pragma-dialectical framework, Van Eemeren et al. (2002) deliberate that the simplest argument is in the form of single argument which mostly consists of one premise. However, it could be much more complex. The first type of this complex argument is multiple argumentations. It consists of alternative defenses of the same standpoint, presented one

after another. These alternative defenses do not depend on each other to support the standpoint, and they are, in principle, of equal weight. Different from multiple argumentation, the second type of complex argument-coordinative argumentation- consists of a combination of arguments taken together to defend a standpoint and constitute a conclusive defense. It indicates that these arguments depend on other arguments as they will be weak if they are separated. The last type of complex argumentation is subordinative argumentation. On this type, arguments are given layer after layer. It means that if a certain argument is not adequate to support an initial standpoint, this argument will be further supported by another argument. This process is done until the defense seems conclusive.

However, an argumentative essay is not all about arguments which are given to support a standpoint. Since the main purpose of argumentative discussion is to resolve the difference of opinion, it is expected that there will be counter arguments to rebut the standpoint. Therefore, Chase (2011) through her research entitled 'An Analysis of the Argumentative Writing Skills of Academically Underprepared College Students' provides more elaboration of this argumentative structure. First, she categorized standpoint into two categories: positive and negative standpoint. It is considered positive (PS) if it expresses affirmative opinion about proposition or standpoint (Chase, 2011, p.101). On the other hand, negative opinion toward a standpoint is classified as negative standpoint (NS). The supporting arguments for a standpoint are named as reasons (R) based on Chase.

Arguments given layer after layer are known as subordinative arguments. Regarding subordinative arguments, Chase (2011) differentiates these arguments into retrogressive and progressive presentation. The former depicts that the reason that clinches the argument is given last, with a chain of reasoning leads to this argument. It means that the reason that provides the base of support is provided the last. Different from retrogressive, each succeeding reason can be taken as an argument for the preceding reason in progressive form.

In the matter of arguments given to oppose a standpoint, Chase describes it in several terms. First, alternative standpoint (AS) is a presented position that is directly opposed writers' stated standpoint. This alternative standpoint can be elaborated in form of counterargument (CA) in which it is a criticism or objection that can be used to undermine a person's standpoint. In order to defend a writer's standpoint, he needs to provide rebuttal (RB) as a response to counterarguments. In addition, this rebuttal not only expresses doubt about alternative standpoint but also undermines or weakens the standpoint of counterargument. At the end of an essay, writers need to clearly restate their stand towards an issue in concluding paragraph. It is useful to leave something to remember for readers and to reinforce writer's standpoint.

In fact, not all statements given in an essay can be classified as relevant arguments to support a standpoint. A writer sometimes gives repetition or any other information that does not appear to be relevant to the topic. Chase (2011) defines these types of statements as nonfunctional units (NF).

3. RESEARCH METHOD

In this descriptive research, the data were collected from 20% of English students at UNP, in 2013/2014 academic year, who have completed their Writing courses and are taking TEFL class at that time. Each student was assigned to write an argumentative essay consisting of 300-400 words length. Then, the students' argumentative essays were scored and graphed in order to see the argumentative elements used, and the quality of their essays. In order to gain reliable data, guideline for identifying argumentative elements was provided along with the way to make the graph of argumentative elements. The quality of the students' argumentative essays was analyzed by using analytical scoring rubrics from Weigle (2002, p.118-19).

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

From the analysis of data acquired, there are two things that need to be discussed further.

a. How the students structure their supports influences the quality of the students' argument.

In composing the argumentative essays, the students have to be able to see and discuss the issue from two perspectives. Therefore, the students, who prefer to take the stand regarding the issue discussed, need to convey reasons to support their standpoint, as well as counterarguments to support the

alternative standpoints. Meanwhile, for those who only remain neutral, they just have to present arguments from both positive and negative points of view.

The finding shows that the students gave more emphasis on defending arguments to support their standpoints rather than on counterarguments which strengthen their alternative standpoints. It indicated that in writing argumentative essays, the students were merely able to discuss the issue from two opposing points of view. They preferred to focus on elaborating their best-established beliefs regarding the topic discussed. In other words, the students were difficult to position themselves as the writers who are discussing an issue, but they tended to be the writers who are defending their stands. This is not accordance with the basic concept of pragma-dialectical framework in which its objective is to find the resolution of the difference of opinion, not to win the debate.

This finding is in line with the prior research conducted by Chase (2011) in which the students were not able to provide proper elaboration for the counterargument. Furthermore, Nussbaum & Kardash (2005) state that students often do not realize that considering and rebutting the opposing views often increases the persuasiveness of their own arguments. That is why they tended to focus more on arguments defending their stand.

Regarding the quality of arguments, the students, on average, produced argumentative essays which were partially developed. This finding is consistent with the previous research conducted on academically underprepared college students (Chase, 2011) which showed that 69% of these students did not develop their arguments well. The finding revealed that most of the students were only able to elaborate either their defending arguments or counter arguments until argument level 2. It indicated that the students had problem in elaborating their idea, and providing evidence for their arguments. It might be caused by another essential problem faced by most of Indonesian students: lack of reading. That is why their arguments were only about their personal experiences and subjective judgments.

In more detail, the developed essays were mainly produced by the students who presented the equal number of defending arguments and counter arguments. Adequate support is one of the criteria in assessing ideas and arguments based on Michigan Writing Assessment Guide as stated in Weigle (2002). Adequate support is not about the quantity of supports given, but about the elaboration of the supports themselves. Thus, it can be seen that the students who only provided a few number of supports in the equal weight of defending and counter arguments were more able to elaborate their ideas and evidence. This confirms a meta-analysis previously conducted by O'Kefe (1999) who conveys that texts consisted of the balance number of arguments and counterarguments were more persuasive than those that did not.

However, in regard to the students remaining neutral, developed essays were performed by the students presenting more support for negative standpoints. It suggests that there is a tendency from the students to choose a certain stand, but they preferred not to state it explicitly. Moreover, these students were learning several types of teaching method in their TEFL classes. Their knowledge and understanding about other methods perhaps influence them to provide more supports for negative standpoints, though they discussed it from both positive and negative standpoints. This finding is inconsistent with the study carried out by Nussbaum and Kardash (2005) who found out that the students with extreme attitude about the controversial issue (those who clearly state their stand) generated fewer alternative standpoint than those with less extreme attitude (remain neutral).

Furthermore, Van Eemeren et al. (2002) convey that the defenses for the standpoint can be presented in the form of single or complex arguments. Each type of complex argument has different contribution to the strength of the defense. The finding of this study shows that developed arguments were mostly presented in the form of multiple arguments. It indicated that the more evidence given to support an argument, the better defense given for a stand. It is in line with the theory proposed by Van Eemeren et al. (2002) which explains that the multiple arguments are the defenses which do not depend on each other to support the standpoint. Hence, if the students give one weak chain of support for the standpoint, it will not affect or weaken other supports since they theoretically stand alone and do not influence each other.

In contrast, the subordinative arguments are the arguments presented layer after layer. It means one support is the support for the initial one. In the matter of fact, the students are less able to

give convincing evidence for the support given. Apparently, they are able to give the reason for their claim, but they fail to prove why it is so. Thus, the arguments which were supported by subordinative arguments only produce less qualified writing since one weak support will affect the strength of the whole defense.

However, it does not mean that providing subordinative arguments weaken the defense, and it must be avoided. Subordinative arguments would produce strong chain of defense if each layer can prove or support the previous layer, and make them as a whole defense. Hence, it is better to give multiple arguments which are then supported by strong chain of subordinative arguments.

In the other side, the student who did not discuss the issue from both perspectives demonstrates minimally-developed discussion essays. It is possible to happen because they did not compose them based on the concept of argumentative essays in which they have to see the issue from two opposing points of view.

Regarding the analysis above, it can be stated that the students' main problem is in providing the equal number of defending arguments and counter-arguments as a whole defense. Thus, the following three strategies are expected to be able to help students in integrating their arguments and counter-arguments (Nussbaum and Schraw, 2007)

b. Strategies to integrate arguments with counterarguments

In order to provide the equal weight of arguments and counter-arguments, a writer should be able to think from two opposing points of view. It means that the writers do not only advance their arguments in favor of their positions, but they also provide arguments discarding the other side's arguments. By doing this, the writers will be able not only to give more support for their view but also to rebut the counter-arguments. This strategy is called *refutation strategy*. Van Eemeren (1996) made the distinction between strong and weak refutation. Strong refutation occurs when one attacks the standpoint by showing that the proposition is unacceptable; meanwhile, the contradictory proposition is acceptable. Casting doubt on the attacked standpoint without providing any defense for the opposite standpoint is categorized as weak refutation.

The second strategy for integrating argument and counter-argument is *synthesizing strategy*. Here, the writers develop an in-between position or solution that combines the merits of both sides. It means that the writers still consider the opposing views but they try to develop a final conclusion representing a compromise between the arguments and the counterarguments. For example, the proposition states that children should not be allowed to watch TV because there are many violent and negative programs broadcasted. The opposing view argues that watching TV for children provides them with some useful knowledge. The argument as a result of synthesizing strategy is that children should only be allowed to watch TV under parents' supervision so that any negative effects can be minimized.

Weighing strategy is the third strategy to integrate arguments and counter-arguments. Weighing the arguments means that you directly compare between them (Barghava, 2011). In the other words, the writers try to argue that the weight of evidence of one side of the issue is stronger than that from the other sides; therefore, the advantages of a solution outweigh the disadvantages.

5. CONCLUSION

Through this present study, it was found out that the students presented all argumentative elements in their argumentative essays, and represented them in various structures of argument: simple, multiple, subordinative, and coordinative argument. Furthermore, it was also found out that the generation of counterargument can increase the persuasiveness of the students' arguments since it indicated that the students defended his stand not only by concerning his supporting views but also the opposing views which potentially able to weaken his stand. In addition, the characteristics of multilingual learners also contribute to the argumentative elements presented.

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