

Raising Students' Awareness on Fallacies in Argumentative Writing

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Abstract

Presenting convincing arguments to defend a standpoint in an argumentative essay was one of the problems of English Department students of UNP. Convincing arguments based on pragma-dialectical framework are those which do not violate any of critical discussion rules. Violations of these rules are known as fallacies. This present study aimed at analyzing types of fallacies mostly made by the students in their argumentative writing. It was expected that by knowing these fallacies, students would pay more attention on the strength of the defense presented, and minimize any weak arguments. It was revealed that violations of critical discussion rules done by the students mostly related to their lack of ability to provide adequate evidences and facts to support their stands.

Key words: argumentative writing, fallacies, critical discussion rules.

A. Introduction

Different from verbal communication in which speakers can clarify the meaning uttered, writing is a nonverbal communication which requires its writers to deliver the crystal gist to readers and minimize any errors or mistakes. Thus, for most of language learners, writing seems to cause bigger problem than other language skills. Among all types of genres, argumentative writing is perceived to pose greater problem for the students. According to an interview conducted to the English students of UNP, it was found out that their obstacles mainly related to their lack of ability to attain and develop persuasive ideas, and also their inadequate comprehension with the issues discussed. In addition, most of the students state that they tend to focus on the accuracy of grammar in their writing, and they still do not know the criteria of good arguments and how to make them convincing.

Base on pragma-dialectical framework, any kind of argumentation given in order to resolve difference of opinion and reach some kinds of reasonable agreement is named argumentative discussion which is also known as critical discussion (Van Eemeren et al., 2002). Thus, an argument will be considered acceptable and convincing if there is no violation to any critical discussion rules. A statement or speech act which violates these critical discussion rules, and impedes the resolution of a difference of opinion is judged as fallacy. This study was conducted to analyze types of fallacies which are mostly made by the students in their argumentative writing.

Theoretical Review

Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004) explain that the critical discussion rules are called as "ten commandments" which only focus on prohibition of moves in argumentative discourse that can hinder the resolution of different opinion on the merits.

Rule 1: Parties must not prevent each other from putting forward standpoints or casting doubt on standpoints (Freedom Rule).

Van Eemeren et al. (2009) explain that standpoints and doubt regarding standpoints should be expressed freely. It means that neither protagonist nor antagonist has the right to limit

the other party's freedom to put forward standpoints, arguments, expressions of doubt or other criticism.

This freedom rule can be violated in various ways. The first one is by giving any threats which are intended to restrict other party from freely putting forward his standpoint or criticism. This violation is called fallacy of the stick or *argumentum ad baculum*. Van Eemeren (2010) expresses that the ultimate way of hindering a party to state a standpoint or casting doubt is by making the opponent literally impossible to speak. The second violation is putting pressure on the opponent by playing on his emotion and taking advantage of the compassionate feeling of the others. Such of this fallacious move is called appeal to pity or known as *argumentum ad misericordiam*. Next, presenting the other party as stupid, unreliable, or unworthy of credibility is another violation of freedom rule named personal attack or *argumentum ad hominem*. It is more to a personal attack on an opponent rather than on opponent's views. Goshgarian et.al (2003) assert that personal criticism, even if it is true, can be overemphasized and therefore undercut the writer's credibility since it is lack of objectivity on its basis.

Rule 2 : A party who puts forward a standpoint is obliged to defend it if asked to do so (obligation-to-defend rule).

One of the classic Roman antiquity rule states "Whoever claims, has to defend". This is somehow what the second rule means. It explains that the one who initiates the topic also has to be the one to present the argumentation first. Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004) convey that this step is very essential to determine the role of discussants, either protagonist or antagonist. Unless they have no clear distribution of role, a difference of opinion will remain stuck in the opening stage, and cannot be resolved. If the party initiating the topic escapes from this obligation, he has conducted a fallacy named shifting the burden of proof. It means that he gives the responsibility to the opponent to propose their argumentation.

As explained by Van Eemeren (2009), the next types of violation can be likely carried out by both protagonist and antagonist. Generally, it is named evading the burden of proof. This type of fallacy is performed in several ways. First, either protagonist or antagonist attempts to introduce standpoint as something which does not require any further defense because it is self-evident. Second, give personal guarantee to the correctness of a standpoint. In this type of fallacy, a party makes an effort to support his argumentation by showing his expertise or authority related to the issue discussed, and he personally vouches for the accuracy of the standpoint. The last type of violation is evading the burden of proof by phrasing a standpoint that makes it become immune to criticism. This strategy to formulate a standpoint causes it cannot be tested or evaluated, even though it seems convincing.

Rule 3: A Party's attack on a standpoint must relate to the standpoint that has indeed been advanced by the other party (standpoint rule).

Violation of this rule happens when the standpoint attacked is not the standpoint put forward by the protagonist (Van Eemeren et al., 2002). It will take place when the original standpoint is misrepresented, and made-up standpoint is attributed to the opponent. When it occurs, either protagonist or antagonist has conducted a fallacy of straw man. Barnet and Bedau (2008) convey that the fallacy of straw man is intended to reframe or report opponent's standpoint to make it easier to be attacked or even refuted.

Rule 4: Party may defend his or her standpoint only by advancing argumentation related to that standpoint (relevance rule).

Violation of this rule mostly takes place in argumentation stage in which it can be categorized into two types of violation. First is the argument which is not relevant to the standpoint advanced in confrontation stage. It is called irrelevant argumentation. The second type is non-argumentation in which a standpoint is defended with means other than argumentation. For example, when a party treats prejudices and emotions as arguments, it is named as pathetic fallacy. Furthermore, when a speaker or a writer wants to solve the difference of opinion by trying to acquire reader's faith in the expertise, credibility, and integrity, the fallacy of abuse of authority known as *argumentum ad verocundium* is committed.

Rule 5 : A party may not falsely present something as a premise that has been left unexpressed by the other party or deny a premise that he or she has left implicit (unexpressed premise rule)

It is possible that some arguments are left unexpressed or implied. This unexpressed premise or argument can be attacked by the opposing party if it has been made explicit. However, if this party exaggerates this unexpressed premise and takes advantage of it, he has produced the fallacy of magnifying what has been left unexpressed (Van Eemeren et al., 2002). On the other hand, if the party proposing unexpressed premise refuse the commitment to defense it, the fallacy of denying an unexpressed premise has occurred.

Rule 6: No party may falsely present a premise as an accepted starting point, or deny a premise representing an accepted starting point (starting point rule).

Even though a discussion occurs in order to solve different opinion between protagonist and antagonist, both of these parties must have something in common as their starting point (Van Eemeren et al., 2002). It means that before debating the issue and defending their own arguments, they have something that they both agree with and not question anymore such as the definition of the issue discussed. Antagonist will violate this rule if he questions a proposition that was agreed on as a starting point. It goes the same to protagonist; he violates this rule when a statement that he assumes as an acceptable starting point is actually not a case under discussion. If one of the parties violates this rule, he has produced the fallacy of circular reasoning which is also called begging the question or petition principia. Furthermore, Mayberry (2009) also states that this fallacy also occurs when an expression which is the same or synonymous with the standpoint is considered as a common starting point.

Rule 7: The reasoning in the argumentation must be logically valid or must be capable of being made valid by making explicit one or more unexpressed premises.

This type of violation is considered as the most important of the fallacies. One type of fallacy occurs as the violation of validity rule is fallacy of composition. Van Eemeren et al. (2002) state that it happens when a discussant treats the whole as a simple sum of the separate parts. In other words, he assumes one case of the whole will also apply to each component parts. Another type of fallacy named as invalid reasoning occurs when reasoning, after making explicit everything that was left unexpressed, is still invalid (Van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 2004).

Rule 8: A standpoint may not be regarded as conclusively defended if the defense does not take place by means of an appropriate argument scheme that is correctly applied (argument scheme rule).

The main objective of presenting argumentation is to support the standpoint. The defense of a standpoint can be considered successful if the protagonist can properly apply argument scheme (Van Eemeren et al., 2002). They explain that argument schemes can be in the form of symptomatic, analogy, or causal relations. If one of those schemes is used in inappropriate way, the protagonist violates rule 8. For example in symptomatic relation, when a protagonist claims that a certain standpoint should be accepted just because so many people agree with it, it signifies that he has conducted populist fallacy or *argumentum ad populum*. Mayberry (2009) says that this fallacy is a corruption of the legitimate tactic of appealing to strengthen a claim. Another fallacy happens in symptomatic relation is a fallacy of abuse of authority (*argumentum ad verecundiam*). Here, a discussant presents that an argument defending a standpoint is true because the authority says it is so. Fallacy of hasty generalization which also occurs in symptomatic relation is a fallacy which is caused by generalization of the evidence based on too few observations. Goshgarian et al. (2003) asserts that hasty generalization can also occur when a discussant relies on evidence that is not factual or substantiated. Thus, each party should be able to provide more than one example and avoid using uncritical statements and words such as always, all, more, never, only and most.

Quite similar with argument scheme which uses symptomatic relation, inappropriate use of causal relation occurs when protagonist or antagonist mistakenly provides confusing facts with value judgments or personal judgment. This violation is named *argumentum ad*

consequentiam. Further, cause and effect relation which cannot be supported by a fact can be categorized as fallacy of *post hoc ergo propter hoc* (after this, therefore, because of this). Mayberry (2009) explains that it is a claim which asserts that because one event preceded another, it must have caused the subsequent event to occur. In addition, Goshgarian et al. (2009) explains that this fallacy occurs when there is simply no link between the two events which is assumed have cause and effect relations. Furthermore, another type of fallacy happens in causal relation is the fallacy of the slippery slope. When a discussant suggests that a certain circumstance will be getting worse but in fact he fails to come up with evidence that such effect will occur, he has carried out fallacy of slippery slope. Mayberry (2009) asserts that this fallacy mostly happens in argument of effect when one party wishes to prove that the consequences of a particular action are likely to be negative.

Basically, a difficult or unfamiliar concept can be clarified by comparing it with something easily understood or by giving analogy. The analogy given must be a sound one (Van Eemeren et al., 2002). It means that two things compared are really comparable. If there is a condition which can invalidate comparison, fallacy of false analogy will happen. Mayberry (2009) adds that analogy can be used in generating and illuminating arguments, but they cannot prove a point. Therefore, if discussant uses analogy to support rather than explain or illuminate a standpoint, he has probably committed this fallacy.

Rule 9: A failed defense of a standpoint must result in the protagonist retracting the standpoint, and a successful defense of a standpoint must result in the antagonist retracting his or her doubts (the closure rule)

Basically, both of the parties should defend their own standpoint in order to resolve the difference of opinion. However, if one of these parties fails to do so, and the opposing party claims that his standpoint is true, it means he has produced the fallacy of *argumentum ad ignorantiam* (Van Eemeren et al., 2002). It follows this way of concluding: "If it cannot be proven that x is the case, it is therefore proven that x is not the case", or alternatively "If it cannot be proven that x is not the case, it is therefore proven that x is the case."

Rule 10: Parties must not use any formulations that are insufficiently clear or confusingly ambiguous, and they must interpret the formulations of the other party as carefully and accurately possible (the usage rule).

Van Eemeren et al. (2009) explain that a party who makes use of unclear or ambiguous language to improve his or her own position in the discussion has made the fallacy of unclarity or ambiguity. The unclarity can be resulted from implicitness, indefiniteness, unfamiliarity, and vagueness.

Methodology

English Department students who have completed all writing courses were assigned to write argumentative essays under the topic about Grammar Translation Method. Their writing tasks were then analyzed based on the rubric of criteria for identifying fallacies.

B. Discussion

Of 20 writing tasks analyzed, it was revealed that there were 8 types of fallacies which were most commonly made by the students in their argumentative essays.

1. Hasty generalization

From the data gathered, almost all students made the fallacy of hasty generalization though it appeared in different number. Actually, there were about 20 occurrences in total. They mostly happened when the students did not provide adequate evidence for the reason given, so that they were considered inconclusive defense. Exaggerating a conclusion and using inappropriate word choice were other factors which made the students' arguments categorized as the fallacy of hasty generalization. Some examples of this fallacy were elaborated below.

Data 1.

- a. GTM can create frustration for student because they have no interest to learn since they only memorize and translate the language (Student 10)

- b. This approach also provides students the translation session and the use of words in the literacy which can be concluded the student translation and understanding or knowledge about the words cannot be questioned (Student 3)
- c. The use of native language in GTM will make students feel easier to express their feeling, feel more confident, and feel easier to catch the main point of lesson (student 16)

The statements above were identified as the fallacy of hasty generalization because the students jump to a conclusion without giving adequate evidence to support it. Principally, all the points presented above could be good supports for the standpoint proposed if the writers were able to come up with convincing evidences which can strengthen their points. Unfortunately, they failed to do so, and tended to only support their point by giving their own personal opinion.

2. Fallacy of post hoc ergo proper hoc

Basically, it has quite similar concept with the fallacy of hasty generalization since both of them see whether the writers have presented adequate evidence or not. However, the fallacy of post hoc ergo proper hoc emphasizes more on the writer's failure to show cause and effect relations. It can be seen in one of the students' arguments below:

"If the students always pay attention to grammar structural, they will be awkward to use the target language in interaction with others" (Student 11)

No evidence or further explanation was given to show that paying attention on grammar will make the students difficult to interact with others. Moreover, paying attention on grammar does not mean the students do not pay attention to other required skills to interact with others.

3. Populist fallacy (the argumentum ad populum)

Some of the arguments presented by the students to support their standpoint were based on public opinion towards the issue discussed. It would be acceptable if this public opinion referred to study result, interview, or questionnaire, and it is named as populist argumentation. However, if the writers tried to make their arguments acceptable by claiming so many people agree with it, they have produced the populist fallacy (the argumentum ad populum). It was proven in the following statements produced by the students.

Data 2.

- a. *Million of people* have successfully learnt foreign languages to high degree of proficiency and in numerous cases, without any contact with native speakers of the language. (student 1)
- b. *Like what we have know* that the objectives or goal of this method is to teach translation. (student 12)
- c. However, *people* tend to abandon the previous generation...(student 15)
- d. *As we know* today children lazy to speak with other people (student 18)

The above argument shows that the writer tried to make the argument accepted as a public opinion without explaining in more detail who this "million of people" are, and the evidence that it is so. Furthermore, the arguments which were categorized as populist fallacies could be related to the diction used by the writers, as seen in the above examples.

4. Circular reasoning/Begging the question/Petition principia

An argument is categorized as the fallacy of circular reasoning when the argument used is only the restatement of the standpoint under discussion. This was proven by the following arguments produced by the students.

"Sentence 7 as the topic sentence of paragraph 2 states, 'This method is not effective because just focus on reading and writing skill'. The following sentence as the supporting sentence is supposed to explain the bad effect of a method which only focuses on reading and writing skill, and why it is considered ineffective. In fact, the writer only states "I think if education practitioner still use this method, it will give the bad effect for students because this

method just focus on reading and writing skills”. There is no elaboration or explanation of the argument since it only states something similar with the previous one.

5. Ethical fallacy of abuse of authority (argumentum ad verecundiam)

Some students preferred to support their arguments by quoting an opinion from someone considered has an expert on the issue discussed and from related sources. Unfortunately, most of them defend their stand by quoting from Wikipedia. Since Wikipedia is a site in which any visitors can add or edit the posted text, nobody can guarantee those who have posted it are the ones who have expertise on that issue. In short, supporting arguments by referring to opinion stated in Wikipedia is considered unacceptable and categorized as ethical fallacy of abuse of authority.

6. Irrelevant Argumentation (ignoratio elenchi)

In nutshell, this fallacy occurred when the writers provide unrelated arguments in order to defend the standpoint. For example:

“Student 13 states that the implementation of GTM means less class activities and games, and students just translate one text to another language. This explanation is followed by a statement from the writer “So, this method does not need a teacher who fluent in target language.” This statement was categorized as the fallacy of irrelevant argumentation (ignoratio elenchi) since there is no relation between the argument and the standpoint brought forward.”

7. Evading the burden of proof.

From three aspects which can cause the fallacy of evading the burden of proof, making the argument as if it is self-evident was the strategy used by the writers to support their standpoint. One of them wrote,

“...many people are sure that this method can increase students’ ability in reading and writing.” (Student 11)

Since the writer began the argument by saying “many people are sure”, it indicated that this opinion does not to be proven anymore because it is self-evident. In fact, nobody can guarantee whether it is true or not.

8. Slippery Slope

The writers produced this fallacy when they present argument from consequences, but they failed to come up with evidence to show that the effect will occur. One of the wrote,

“By using GTM, students will not master the language for long time, they just try hard to make sense about structure of word and the pattern, just like when they are studying math or physics which is full of rules.” (student 11)

The arguments above showed that the implementation of GTM will only hinder the students in mastering the language. Moreover, it was getting worse since the students only focused on sentence pattern and structure. These arguments would have been acceptable if the writer could have elaborated the reasons why GTM had no contribution in helping the students to master the language, and in what way making sense of sentence structure was unable to help students mastering the language.

C. Conclusion

This paper focuses on the fallacies made by the students in composing argumentative writing. Fallacies as violations of critical discussion rules can weaken the strength of the defense presented. Through this paper, it can be concluded that English Department students of UNP had lack of skills in providing proper evidences and facts to support their standpoints. They inclined to jump on a conclusion with too little observation. Using inappropriate sources as the support was another violation of critical discussion rules carried out by the students.

Therefore, it is important to make the students more aware of fallacies in order to present convincing arguments.

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