

Conference Paper

An Argumentative Essay Scale: Its Assessment Criteria to Employ

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Abstract

It is widely known that the criteria in assessing writing are crucial, and they become the central component of assessment design. This study was conducted due to the significance of assessing argumentative essays published by the forth EFL Learners in English Language Education Study Program. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to determine the assessment criteria on which the scales are supposed to be based. Eight lecturers, who concern on writing, were involved as the sources of data. Their views were investigated to gauge the criteria in assessing argumentative essays. Having been designed as a descriptive qualitative study, threefold methods of collecting data were administered; questionnaire, interview, and focus group discussion (hereafter, FGD). The obtained data were analyzed by means of Interactive Model which involves data collection, data filter, data presentation, and verification. The content, organization, grammar, mechanics, and academic writing skill were recommended by the lecturers to be taken into account in assessing the particular type of essay created by EFL Learners.

Keywords: argumentative essay, assessment criteria, writing skill

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Received: 23 January 2019

Accepted: 26 February 2019

Published: 17 March 2019

Publishing services provided by
Knowledge E

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Selection and Peer-review under
the responsibility of the
International Seminar on
Language, Education, and
Culture Conference Committee.

1. Introduction

Academic writing constitutes a crucial aspect of writing for EFL university students in Indonesia. In an article entitled Learning to Write: Writing to Learn, it has been stated that academic writing plays a major role in higher education, both in student understanding of course content and the consequent assessment of student knowledge. Therefore, the art of academic writing lies on how well the writing skill of the students and how critical they are in in advanced level. Additionally, Oshima and Hogue (2007) argued that academic writing is constituted by a formal set of structures in conveying ideas which obviously respects formality. Writing academically has its own rules and practices which need to be strictly followed. These characteristics differ academic writing with personal and creative writing.

Actually, university students in Indonesia are non-native English speakers who crucially need to master academic writing. Students enrolling higher education are

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expected to become proficient academic writers in the course of their studies. It is because academic writing is used to express acquired knowledge in specific area (Ofte, 2014). This genre of writing tends to be serious in nature and often demonstrates particular theories or arguments. Moreover, Howard stated that academic writing is “not a reflex of morality or property but a complex intellectual skill” (2004a, p. 9). It is in line with Freebody and Chambers (2017) who stated that achieving the success of academic writing engrosses many elements that contribute to it which range from students’ willingness to do the planning, researching, reading, critical thinking and understanding the question as well as structuring the assignment into a coherent piece of analytical work that adequately answers the question.

One particular essay which represents English academic writing is argumentative essay. Based on Zhu (2001, p.34), “Argumentative writing as a mode of academic writing constitutes an important part of foreign language learners’ academic experience”. Argumentative writing appears to be the most important task for the students as they need to use it in exams and papers. Argument is considered to be the key rhetorical purpose of much academic writing, indeed is seen as an essential aspect of intellectual activity within higher education (Coffin, et. al., 2003, p.14). Besides, Alvarez (2001) as stated in Chala and Chapeton (2012) defined argumentative essay writing as the set of strategies of an orator who addresses an audience looking to modify their judgement, get their adhesion, or make them admit a given situation or an idea. It is complemented by Díaz (2002) who claimed that predominantly argumentative essays deal with controversial topics, and in them an author defends a point of view that he/she considers valid. Their purpose is to convince, get an adhesion, justify a way to see facts, refute interpretations about an event, or persuade the reader to change an opinion about a subject.

Argumentative essay can be written by applying several patterns. The first is one-sided style: the essay only talks about one point of view (pro side), the second is clustering style: in one essay, there is one body paragraph talks about the opponent argument (contra side), and the other three body paragraphs talk about the pro side, the third is alternating style: each body paragraph in one essay contains one contra argument and it is rebutted by pro argument, and the last is combination style. According to Toulmin (1958) as stated in Nimehchisalem (2011, p.59), a good piece of argument commonly consists of six elements: claim [C]: the statement of the thesis, data [D]: the evidence providing proof for C, warrant [W]: the principle that bridges D to C implicitly/explicitly, proving the legitimacy of D, qualifiers [Q]: the linguistic cues that show the strength of the C, D or W, backing [B]: further support for W, rebuttal [R]: response to the anticipated objections against the arguments.

Because of these patterns and elements, to write a successful argumentative essay, the writer not only organizes words, phrases and sentences but also involves grasping the topic, developing the statement, organizing a coherent discourse and putting ideas into writing. It means that the writer should use an appropriate style to create relevant and rational ideas that are linked and arranged logically with the help of the writer's language, world and strategic competencies). In order to learn to write and revise effectively, student writers should know how to differentiate successful from unsuccessful pieces, which suggests that assessing is an indispensable part of teaching writing (Huot, 2002).

It is widely known that writing product is produced by following gradual process, meaning that it is highly inappropriate to assess writing by using a single criterion or an objective test wherein score is given by comparing student responses with an established set of correct responses on an answer key. However, "a valid and reliable assessment of learners' written works is facilitated through writing scales that provide the evaluators with a set of descriptors for each level of writing performance" (Nimehchisalem, 2011, p.58). Attali and Burstein (2006) recognized grammar, usage, mechanics, style, organization, development, vocabulary and word length as the eight important features to be assessed in an automated writing scale. Marhaeni (2010, p. 7) revealed that content, organization, structure, style and diction, and mechanism are the criteria which are used as the dimensions in building rubric and checklist in writing.

Based on the aforementioned elucidation, this study followed the objective of determining the assessment criteria on which the scales are supposed to be based that writing lecturers consider as significant in evaluating argumentative essay. In order to meet the objective, the following research question was posed: What assessment criteria are regarded as crucial in evaluating argumentative essay?

2. Method

The respondents of this study were 8 lecturers in English Language Education Study Program (hereinafter, ELESP) who had experienced in teaching writing. All 8 respondents, 3 males and 5 females, with years of teaching writing at university level ranging from 2 to 7 years. They are non English native speakers, but all of them had earned their master degree in English education field. Actually, all of them were familiar with writing scoring rubric; however, several said that they had limited experience in rating argumentative essay.

To meet the necessity of answering the research question, a descriptive qualitative study was accomplished as the research design. In this design, quantitative data collection preceded qualitative data collection. However, the qualitative results are prioritized, while the quantitative findings shed light on the qualitative data to deepen the understanding of the results.

To collect a rich set of data, these instruments were distributed, namely: open-ended questionnaire and two interview guides respectively for the interview session as well as the Focus Group Discussion session. The open-ended questionnaire was adapted from the Evaluative Criteria Checklist for ESL Argumentative Writing, an eleven-item, six-point scale Likert style instrument created by Nimehchisalem (2011). The respondents were required to comment on any criteria and were free to reword the criteria if they found them ambiguous. Therefore, the final row of the questionnaire was left open where the respondents could add any particular criterion if they found an important criterion was missing in the list. Meanwhile, the interview and FGD results were tape recorded, transcribed and analyzed.

The obtained data from spreading the questionnaire as well as conducting interview and FGD were analyzed by means of Interactive Model which occupies data collection, data filter, data presentation, and verification. Then the analysis result was translated into tables to facilitate the interpretation.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. Findings

Having distributed questionnaire to the respondents and invited them to interview and FGD session, this investigation yields both quantitative and qualitative findings that are clarified in this subsection.

3.2. Quantitative findings

The quantitative findings were gathered as the result of spreading the questionnaire in which the descriptive statistical analysis was used to analyse the data. Table (1) shows the descriptive statistical analysis results as follows:

Based on Table 1, the criteria were arranged from the highest means score to the lowest as what the respondents' responses were. The criteria can be classified into three cohorts in terms of their importance: (a) Important/very important (4-5), (b) Fairly

TABLE 1: Descriptive Statistical Analysis Result.

No	Criteria	Total Respondents	Sum	Mean
1	Cohesion	8	40	5.00
2	Effective argumentation	8	39	4.88
3	Syntax	8	38	4.75
4	Coherence	8	38	4.75
5	Usage	8	37	4.63
6	Mechanics	8	35	4.38
7	Style	8	34	4.25
8	Audience awareness	8	33	4.13
9	Essay length	8	32	4.00
10	Intellectual maturity	8	31	3.88
11	Audience invocation	8	29	3.63

important (3-3.99) and (c) Almost important (2-2.99). The results are supported by the following Figure 1 which illustrates the significance of each criterion rated by the respondents as follows:

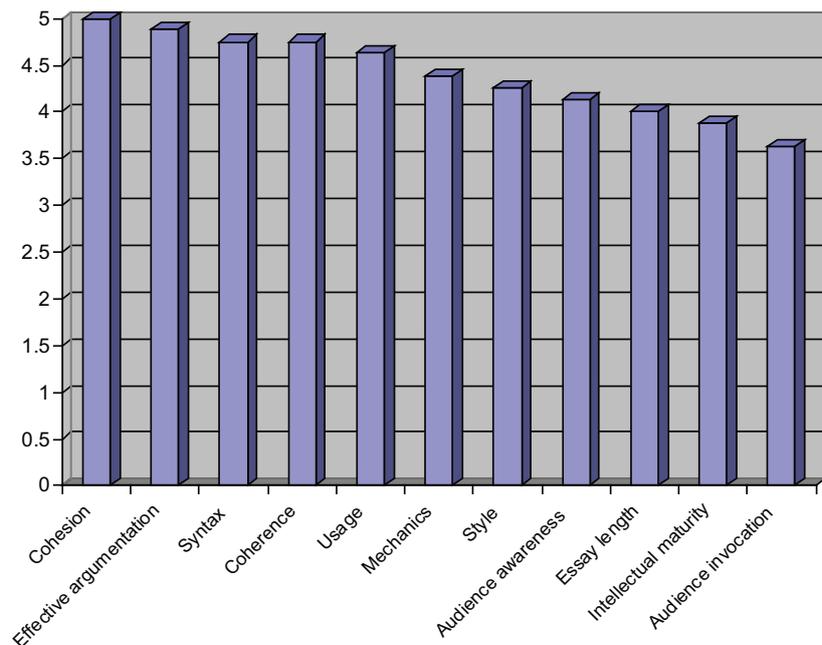


Figure 1: The Importance Level of the Criteria.

In accordance with the Figure 1, after being categorized by using the criteria classification, it was found that respectively cohesion, effective argumentation, syntax, coherence, usage, mechanics, style, audience awareness and essay length as the important/very

important criteria. Meanwhile, intellectual maturity and audience invocation were categorized as the fairly important criteria. None of the criteria was classified as almost important criteria.

3.3. Qualitative findings

In order to enrich this investigation in term of its qualitative findings, the comments and rewordings given by the respondents towards the criteria listed in the questionnaire that they considered ambiguous were explored.

The respondents agreed that all effective criteria to score an argumentative essay have been logically mentioned and explained. However, that very similar wording was probably not working for a novice raters (like students). It was suggested that if students are targeted to use the criteria in evaluating argumentative essay, each criterion needs to have sub criterion which is more specific. For example, intellectual maturity could probably have 2-3 sub criteria to be more specific and clear.

Besides, the respondents also noticed that several criteria overlapped to each other. It seems that syntax and usage overlapped, for both of them focused on the same aspect, grammar. Moreover, one respondent argued that essay length should be made more operational so that it will be much more measureable and the students understand what they should do. It was also added that complete structure of argumentative essay (the essay should have an introductory paragraph, three body paragraphs and a concluding paragraph) can also be used to elucidate essay length criterion. Another respondent also added the term word choice due to the nature of academic writing wherein writers must avoid cliché, colloquial and personal words.

Next, it was performed interview where a collection of questions were asked to the individual respondents and FGD where they were assembled in one place at one moment to discuss about the topic of investigation. The respondents suggested grouping the criteria into subscale which make the raters at ease in using the argumentative essay scale. The terms content, organization, grammar, mechanics, and academic writing skill were recommended by the respondents to be taken into account in creating an argumentative essay rating scale. Then each term needs specific criterion to explicate the sub aspects of each. Based on the qualitative findings, the classification of each criterion into recommended terms can be seen in the following Table 2:

TABLE 2: List of criteria in accordance with the qualitative findings.

No	Criteria	Recommended terms
1	Cohesion	Content
2	Effective argumentation	Content
3	Syntax	Grammar
4	Coherence	Content
5	Usage	Grammar
6	Mechanics	Mechanics
7	Style	Academic writing skill
8	Audience awareness	Academic writing skill
9	Essay length	Organization
10	Intellectual maturity	Academic writing skill
11	Audience invocation	Academic writing skill
12	Essay structure	Organization
13	Word choice	Academic writing skill

4. Discussions

Prior to discussion, quantitative data were obtained followed by qualitative data. Quantitative data were found by means of administering questionnaire to the respondents. The mean scores were calculated indicating the importance level of each criterion listed in the questionnaire. Cohesion, effective argumentation, syntax, coherence, usage, mechanics, style, audience awareness and essay length were grouped as the important/very important criteria, correspondingly. The two criteria which categorized as the fairly important criteria were intellectual maturity and audience invocation, but they were regarded as valuable by the respondents. In fact, no one selected any particular criteria as the almost important criteria.

This finding is quite similar to the previous finding found by Nimehchisalem (2011) that the respondents rated coherence (4.4), cohesion (4.34), effective argumentation (4.22) and syntax (4.15) as the important/very important criteria. The four criteria in the previous study were still selected as the important/very important criteria by this present study's respondents. Meanwhile, usage, mechanics, style, and audience awareness which regarded as the important/very important criteria in this later study were chosen as the fairly important criteria in the former study. Similarly, intellectual maturity and audience invocation were regarded as the fairly important criteria in both former and later study. Conversely, essay length was still one of the favourite lists in the important/very important criteria in this study.

In relation to the qualitative data, it was warned that several criteria overlapped. It will create confusion if the criteria are not clarified by using more specific explanation. Therefore, based on this excerpt, several terms were proposed to group the overlapped criteria namely, content, organization, grammar, mechanics, and academic writing skill (Table 2). It is similar to Rambo's argument (2018) that in evaluating an argumentative essay, 6 elements are needed. Those elements which are crucial namely organization, style, mechanic, support and development of ideas, insight into subject, and clarity. Additionally, an analysis of the interviews and the commentaries written by raters justifying the scores they gave in Fernandez and Siddiqui's research (2017) showed that there is a great deal of variability in their assessment criteria in terms of grammar, attitude towards mistakes, handwriting, length, creativity and organization and use of cohesive devices.

Additionally, two criteria were added, essay structure and word choice. Each of them was included in organization and academic writing skill. Referring to Table 2 where the recap of the recommended list was published, academic writing skill was the only aspect which has 5 members. It is in line with Oshima and Hogue (2007) stated that academic writing is packaged by a formal set of structures in conveying ideas and it obviously respects formality. Specifically, academic writing can be defined as writing formally, critically, objectively, and structurally. Academic writing is different from creative writing and personal writing. Creative writing and personal writing are informal, so slang, abbreviations, and incomplete sentences are allowed. However, academic writing involves broader than personal writing or other writing genre does. It has its own rules and practices which are strictly required to be followed. Thus, writers must be capable in academic writing skill to produce an argumentative essay due to being the mode of academic writing itself.

5. Conslusions and Suggestions

5.1. Conclusions

After conducting this study, it was discovered that:

1. Cohesion, effective argumentation, syntax, coherence, usage, mechanics, style, audience awareness and essay length listed as the important/very important criteria. Intellectual maturity and audience invocation were regarded as the fairly important criteria. In fact, none of the criteria was classified as almost important criteria.
2. Several terms were proposed to group the overlapped criteria namely, content, organization, grammar, mechanics, and academic writing skill. Two criteria were

added, essay structure and word choice. Each of them was included in organization and academic writing skill.

5.2. Suggestions

Considering the merits and demerits of this current research, suggestions are able to be proposed:

1. It is recommended for English lecturers to apply assessment rating scale as an alternative authentic assessment in argumentative essay writing activity.
2. It is suggested for other researchers to conduct other studies researching participants from different experience of rating and field of study. It would be worth exploring whether assessment rating scale would still be favorable to these other groups.

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