Investigating the element distribution of argumentative essay and its quality: The case of Indonesian EFL students' writing

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Abstract

Although many research studies discussed argumentative essays, little is known about argumentative essays discussing the dialogical exchange of argumentation. This study aims to investigate the distribution of elements and the quality of argumentative essays produced by EFL students. The content analysis was employed to examine their argumentative essays. The data were garnered from essay writing tests for forty students of the English Department at a state university in Palangka Raya, Indonesia. They were assigned to write an argumentative essay about "Online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic." The data analysis comprised collecting, categorizing, and displaying the data and conclusion drawing. The results indicated that (1) a greater number of the students were not able to supply all elements of an argumentative essay, such as an explanation of an issue, thesis statement, counterargument, refutation, and conclusion, and (2) most of them failed to obtain excellence qualification. The study findings imply how teachers can redesign the materials, find effective strategies for teaching an argumentative essay, and provide many practice opportunities. The teachers should focus on teaching an argumentative essay element by allowing the students to understand the goal of each element and integrate them to form a well-developed argumentative essay.

Keywords: argumentative essay; argumentative essay element; argumentative writing skills; EFL students' writing; element distribution; higher education; writing quality

Introduction

In recent years, argumentation skills have been considered essential for higher education success (Prata et al., 2019). Students are often demanded to have argumentation skills to argue about their position related to complicated and debatable issues in line with their specific domain of expertise (Fan & Chen, 2021; Glassner, 2017; Lazarou et al., 2016). In addition, most students at higher education levels practice their argumentation skills by writing argumentative text, particularly in essay writing (el Majidi et al., 2021; Latifi et al., 2021, 2023), which is considered to be one of the most common types of academic writing (Husin & Ariffin, 2012; Mei, 2006; Shaw & Pecorari, 2013). Hence, argumentative essay writing skills are urgent for EFL students to succeed in academic writing.

There are many areas that several scholars, such as the concept, arguments, counterarguments, and evidence, have studied. Wingate (2012) found that first-year students had little knowledge of the concepts of an argumentative essay. The EFL students lacked knowledge of the kinds and elements of an argumentative essay and received insufficient and inconsistent instruction. Aunurrahman et al. (2017) found that the students paid little attention to the diagrammatic structure and critical thinking ability. Regarding the soundness of arguments, it was found that the Iranian EFL students still generated weak arguments in their argumentative essays (Abdollahzadeh et al., 2017; Rashidi & Dastkhezr, 2009).

Numerous studies have been focused on counterarguments. Incorporating counterarguments makes an argumentative essay convincing (Liu & Stapleton, 2014; Nussbaum & Kardash, 2005; Nussbaum & Schraw, 2007). Consequently, inserting counterarguments and refuting them is essential for optimizing the degree of convincingness of argumentative writing (Crammond, 1998; Leitao, 2003; Wolfe & Britt, 2008). Nussbaum and Kardash (2005) focused on writing prompts containing counterarguments and rebuttals. It was revealed that by

instructing counterarguments in the prompt, students tended to increase the myriad of counterarguments and rebuttals compared to those who received an empty prompt (Huang & Zhang, 2020; Nussbaum & Kardash, 2005). Meanwhile, Nussbaum and Schraw (2007) focused on classroom instructions, graphic organizers, and explicit instruction. The methods were found to be more effective in scaffolding the ability of the students to produce counterarguments. Furthermore, Liu and Stapleton (2014) found that including counterarguments and rebuttals was strongly associated with the score of an argumentative essay. Moreover, ignoring counterarguments or alternative views is considered a common weakness or deficiency in students' argumentative writing at both senior high school (e.g., Ferretti et al., 2009) and university levels (e.g., Nussbaum & Schraw, 2007; Rusfandi, 2015; Wolfe & Britt, 2008). Most EFL students write a one-sided model of argumentation in their L1 (Indonesian) and L2 (English) essays (Rusfandi, 2015). This indicates that the counterargument was ignored.

An argumentative essay cannot be separated from evidence. Without supporting evidence, the arguments will be weak (Macagno, 2016; Zhang, 2018). Zhang (2018) investigated evidence in Chinese EFL learners' argumentative writing. He found that explanation was used dominantly by Chinese English majors (Zhang, 2011, 2018). The students relied heavily on explanations because of the students' lack of knowledge and skills (Macagno, 2016). Moreover, Macagno (2016) indicated that in the essays, most of the evidence was coded as relevant, while others were coded as irrelevant and wrongly used. Most of the evidence was classified as relevant in the dialogues, and others were classified as irrelevant and wrongly used (Macagno, 2016). These findings indicate that the student writers need to use evidence to support their arguments.

In presenting argumentation, it is different from EFL/ESL context. Research by Suzuki (2010) indicated that the arguments written by the Japanese respondents tended to be more indirect and succinct styles than those written by the U.S. respondents. Wu and Rubin (2000) and Zhang (2011) also found that Chinese writers provided examples and direct quotes without elaborating more. In discussing an argumentative essay, the Indonesian EFL students' proficiency in argumentative essay writing was fairly good at the intermediate level (Cahyono et al., 2016). Moreover, Indonesian EFL students still made a number of logical fallacies in their argumentative writing: fallacies by manipulating language, emotion, distraction, and inductive conclusions (El Khoiri & Widiati, 2017). However, in using different writing strategies, learning style preferences affect EFL students' argumentative essay writing across different writing strategies (Sabarun et al., 2023).

As seen from the studies reviewed previously, most of the researchers tended to concentrate on the nomological dimension of an argumentation; little is known about the dialogical dimension as reflected in an argumentative essay in which it accommodates the different perspectives (the writer's or the arguer and the opponent's). This argumentation model is considered the scholarly approach to seeing an issue. Therefore, the students' distributions of elements and ability level in writing English argumentative essays are important to investigate. The current study investigated this issue for several reasons. First, the study helped the teachers to identify individual differences in understanding each of the elements of an argumentative essay so that their instruction could be modified to cater to the different students' needs. Second, it helped the teachers identify the student's weaknesses in every element of an argumentative essay so that extra support (scaffolding) and other remedial treatment programs could be provided to them. Third, it also helped the teachers monitor the student's progress and trend in learning to write the elements of an argumentative essay. In this regard, the teachers could prepare their students better for success in higher education and beyond. By referring to this gap, two research questions are constructed as follows:

(1) How is the distribution of the elements of an argumentative essay produced by the EFL students?
(2) How is the quality of the EFL students' argumentative essays?

Literature review

Argumentative essay in academic writing

Argumentative writing is considered one of the most universal categories of academic writing (see Husin & Ariffin, 2012; Mei, 2006; Shaw & Pecorari, 2013). In an academic context, different viewpoints are very common (see Aunurrahman et al., 2017; Shaw & Pecorari, 2013; Widodo, 2020). Therefore, the voices of opponents and supporters should be displayed (Inglan, 2009). By including both voices of opponents and supporters, the argumentative essay would be fair, balanced, and unbiased (Prata, 2019). Furthermore, Langan (2001) and Richard and Schmidt (2010) defined an argumentative essay as an essay in which a writer attempts to support a controversial point or defends a position on which there is a different opinion. Based on this definition, an argumentative essay is built on different opinions toward a controversial point or issue. This makes sense because the starting point for an argumentative essay is a controversial or arguable issue (Anderson, 2008; Coffin, 2004). However, there is

no reason to argue without a different opinion (disagreement) (Anderson, 2008; Axelrod & Cooper, 2012). Further, Ramage et al. (2021) maintain that an argumentative essay is an essay in which the writer takes a stand on an issue, offers reasons and evidence to support his position, and summarizes and responds to alternative views. This definition suggests that the writers take a position toward an issue through an argumentative essay and provide reasons and evidence why they take the position. Simultaneously, they consider alternative views, summarize the previous discussion, and state their position clearly.

The previous studies tend to focus on the nomological dimension; little is known about the dialogical dimension of argumentative essays. In the monological dimension, the writers only deliver their arguments without considering opposing views. On the other hand, in the dialogical dimension, the different perspectives are also accommodated besides presenting their arguments. This model is claimed to be the most sophisticated because it is presented in a balanced way (Macagno & Rapanta, 2019). In the current study, we were concerned about the dialogical dimension of argumentative essays.

Elements of argumentative essay

Argumentative writing can be classified into two kinds: an opinion essay and an argumentative essay (Rahmanita & Cahyono, 2018). The main difference can be seen or found in the body (Rahmanita & Cahyono, 2018). In the body paragraphs of an opinion essay, writer only provides reasons without refutation (Rahmanita & Cahyono, 2018). In other words, the writer has only a mono point of view, and another perspective is absent. In the body paragraphs of an argumentative essay, the writer provides multiple perspectives and evidence (Oshima & Hogue, 2007; Rahmanita & Cahyono, 2018). The elements of an argumentative essay are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 shows that this argumentative essay comprises three elements: an introduction (explanation of an issue and thesis statement), body paragraphs (three body paragraphs), and a conclusion. Each body contains a counterargument supported by evidence and a refutation supported by evidence as well (Liu, 2005; Liu & Stapleton, 2014).

The quality of the students' argumentative essays

The quality of the students' essays was assessed from the availability of the elements: (1) explanation of an issue, (2) thesis statement, (3) counterargument 1+ evidence 1+ contrasting signal+ refutation 1+ evidence 1, (4) counterargument 2 + evidence 2+ contrasting signal+ refutation 2+ evidence 2,

(5) counterargument 3+ evidence 3+ contrasting signal+ refutation 3+ evidence 3, and (6) conclusion (Oshima & Hogue, 2007). In determining the quality of an argumentative essay, the rubrics were provided and contained three dimensions: qualification, score, and description (see the Appendix). The score ranged from 1, 2, 3, to 4. Each represents very poor, poor, good, and excellent qualifications.

Table 1
The elements of an argumentative essay

Part	Element of argumentative essay
I.	*Introduction (introductory paragraph):* Explanation of the issue Thesis statement: both sides of an issue
II.	*Body:* Body paragraph 1 Statement of the first counterargument and the writer's first refutation. Body paragraph 2 Statement of the second counterargument and the writer's second refutation. Body paragraph 3 Statement of the third counterargument and the writer's third refutation.
III.	*Conclusion:* The restatement of the thesis statement in different words.

(Source: Oshima & Hogue, 2007)

Method

Design

Since the study has much to do with the element distribution and the quality of the EFL students' argumentative essays, content analysis was applied as the research design. This method is widely used in education (Ary et al., 2014; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2014). Content analysis is a research method that can be applied to written or visual materials to identify specified characteristics of the materials (Ary et al., 2014). The materials that can be studied include textbooks, newspapers, webpages, speeches, and other documents. Therefore, content analysis was applicable to explore the contents of the students' English argumentative essays. Although the study used content analysis, quantitative data were still needed to describe the trends or patterns within the data, which function as the basis of analysis (White & Marsh, 2006).

Participants

The participants involved in the study were forty students in the fourth semester of the English Department at a state university in Palangka Raya, Indonesia. Among the participants, six students (15%) were males, and the remaining 34 students (85%) were females. In addition, their ages were varied from 21-23. Table 2 shows the demographic information of the research participants.

Table 2

The demographic information of the participants

Gender	Number (N=40)	Age	Semester	Class
Male	6	21-23	4th	Argumentative Essay
Female	34	21-23	4th	Argumentative Essay

The students were considered suitable as the study participants because the Argumentative Essay class was one of the obligatory courses they should take. As prerequisites to take the course, the students should pass the preceding courses such as Paragraph Writing and Essay Writing. It was assumed that they obtained skills of argumentation through argumentative essay writing.

In terms of research ethics, the following things have been undertaken. First, the Head of the English Department recommendation was asked to get access to conduct the study. Second, the agreement from writing instructor was asked to use his classes. Before data collection, a video conference was conducted with the students to inform the following things. First, the participants were asked about their willingness to participate in the study. Second, the participants were informed about the general goal of the study. Third, the participants were notified that the participation was voluntary. Fourth, the participants were notified that there were no pressures for them to be involved in the study, and they felt free to express their points of view. Fifth, the participants were notified that the writing task would not impact their grades or that the study was unrelated to their institution. Sixth, the participants' responses (the participants' personal information, the names of the students) would be treated with absolute confidence (kept strictly). Seventh, the participants were informed that they were free to quit at any time while responding to the questionnaire or finishing the questions if they found any uncomfortable treatment.

Instruments

Writing test was the main instrument for collecting the data. The relevant way to assess the people's writing ability is to ask them to write (Hughes, 1989). Before

the instrument was used, it was tried to ensure whether it applied to the students. There were ten English department students at the university who were chosen as subjects of try out. There are some reasons why they were chosen. First, they have similarities to the participants of the study. Second, they were about the same age and took the same course. Third, they were knowledgeable and they were not taken as the participants of the study.

After the instrument had been tried out, there were some conclusions to be drawn. First, during the try-out, no student asked the questions related to the clarity of instruction. This means that the instruction in the prompt was clear and understandable. Second, related to the length of the essay, all the students wrote argumentative essays between 300 and 400 words. It means the number of words, 300 to 400, is within their reach. Furthermore, the test blueprint for argumentative essay writing is shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Test blueprint for argumentative essay writing

Essay parts	Elements	Number of paragraphs
Introduction	Explanation of an Issue	1
	Thesis statement	1
Body	Counterargument 1 + evidence 1+ *contrast transition signal*+ refutation 1 + evidence 1	1
	Counterargument 2 + evidence 2+ *contrast transition signal*+ refutation 2 + evidence 2	1
	Counterargument 3 + evidence 3+ *contrast transition signal*+ refutation 3+ evidence 3	1
Conclusion	Restatement of thesis statement	1
	Total	6

In constructing the instrument, two points should be considered: validity and reliability. In terms of validity, theoretical validity was employed. Theoretical validity can be obtained through construct and content validity evidence (Latief, 2014).

To meet the construct validity, a writing prompt (Table 4) was used to ask the students to demonstrate their skill in writing argumentative essays. The instructions in the prompt were brief, simple, and understandable. The instruction specified the essay length the students should produce (300 or 400 words). The prompt contained the criteria to be assessed. Finally, the time allocation was specified to help the students manage their time doing tests. The students were given one week to write the essays. To show the content validity, the instrument must show that it fairly and comprehensively covers the domain

or items to include (Cohen et al., 2000). Referring to this statement, the elements of an argumentative essay were covered in the instrument.

In addition, reliability refers to the consistency of assessment results (Cohen et al., 2000). Two raters were involved in implementing reliability in this study. The criteria for two raters were; (1) the lecturers of writing hold a doctoral degree, and (2) they had the experiences of teaching writing, specifically, argumentative essay course for more than five years. The raters were informed about the study's main goal and the items in both rubrics: (1) the rubric for determining the presence and absence of all elements and (2) the rubric for determining the quality of all elements. The rubric for assessing elements of an argumentative essay is shown in the Appendix. In determining the quality of an argumentative essay, the rubrics contained three dimensions (qualification, score and description). The scores ranged from 1, 2, 3, to 4, representing very poor, poor, good, and excellent.

Data collection

In collecting the data, the following procedures were undertaken. First, the Google Drive was prepared for storing the data. Second, the students were asked to submit their work as a file. Third, their works were checked to make sure the numbers of the students' essays. Fourth, the students are put in alphabetical order (the alphabet replaced their names). Fifth, the students' essays were checked via Turnitin application (plagiarism checker) in order to protect the students from committing plagiarism.

Forty students participated in the writing test. They were assigned to write an argumentative essay. The students were given one week to complete and submit the essays. All essays were written at home because the students were not allowed to go to campus during the COVID-19 pandemic. The topic to write was "Online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic." This topic was chosen because the study was conducted during the pandemic, and it is very hot to discuss. In addition, the students were assumed to have adequate background knowledge on the topic, and they had the potential to find many sources that discussed more about the pandemic. Table 4 shows the prompt used as a guideline for the students in writing tests.

Data analysis

After collecting the students' argumentative essays, the argumentative essays were analyzed by adopting steps as proposed by Wicaksono et al. (2023). The first was collecting the data. All the students' essays were collected and stored in Google Drive. The second was categorizing the data. The data were categorized

into two main parts: each element's presence and absence. Then, the occurrences and the percentages were calculated to help readers understand the data's distribution or trend. The third was displaying the data in table format. Each of the tables contained elements, occurrences, and percentages. There were six tables for accommodating the data. The fourth was drawing a conclusion. The conclusion was drawn from the findings.

Table 4

Prompt for writing guidelines

Topic: Online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic
Some experts and educators believe that it is effective to adopt or implement online learning at colleges or universities during the pandemic. Others disagree with online learning because it has some weaknesses.

Question (stand taking):
To what extend do you agree or disagree on this topic?

Instruction:
Write an argumentative essay with sufficient and relevant evidence. The length of your essay should be between 300 and 400 words. Organize your essay into:
(1) Introductory paragraph: background information + thesis statement
(2) Three body paragraphs:
- Body paragraph 1: counter argument + evidence + contrast transition signal + refutation + evidence
- Body paragraph 2: counter argument + evidence + contrast transition signal+ refutation + evidence
- Body paragraph 3: counter argument + evidence + contrast transition signal + refutation + evidence
(3) Conclusion paragraph: restatement or rephrasing of your thesis statement in the introduction paragraph

(Source: Table by authors)

Findings

The distribution of elements of an argumentative essay

In this section, the distribution of the elements of an argumentative has to do with; explanation of an issue, thesis statement, counterargument, refutation and conclusion. They are explained in the following ways.

Introduction part

The introduction consists of two parts: an explanation of an issue and the thesis statement (sometimes called the claim). Since the issue is related to "Online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic," the explanation of an issue should introduce why online is used in the context of the pandemic. The distributions of the occurrences of the use of an explanation of an issue are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5
The distribution of the use of explanation of an issue

No.	Explanation of an issue	Occurrences	Percentage
1.	Presence	40	100%
2.	Absence	0	0
	Total	40	100%

About Table 5, forty students (100%) were able to supply an explanation of an issue. The summary of the use of an explanation of an issue is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1
The summary of the use of explanation of an issue

Table 5 and Figure 1 (the blue bar diagram) indicated that forty students (100%) could explain an issue. It means all the students can explain an issue when they begin their essays.

Excerpt 1 indicates the student's ability to provide an explanation of an issue. For example, Student M produced his introduction part of the argumentative essay.

Excerpt 1

Introduction of an argumentative essay written by Student M

Online Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Introduction

    The arrival of the COVID-19 outbreak shocks some people around the world. This outbreak is declared as a global pandemic by World Health Organization (WHO). In order to limit the fast spread of the outbreak, several schools, colleges, and universities employ online learning as a substitute for face-to-face (conventional learning).

In the above excerpt, Student M introduces that the COVID-19 outbreak shocks many people all around the world. Then, Student M connects the issue of the pandemic with online learning as a substitute for conventional learning.

    In line with the thesis statement, it should discuss both sides of points of view, the opposing point of view represented by counterargument and refutation (the writer's point of view) toward online learning. The distribution of the occurrences of the use of the thesis statement is summarized in Table 6.

Table 6

The distribution of the use of thesis statement

No.	Thesis statement	Occurrences	Percentage
1.	Presence	21	52.5%
2.	Absence	19	47.5%
	Total	40	100%

    Referring to Table 6, twenty-one (52.5%) students were able to supply a thesis statement, while nineteen (52.5%) students were not able to supply a thesis statement. The summary of the use of thesis statement is shown on Figure 2.

Figure 2

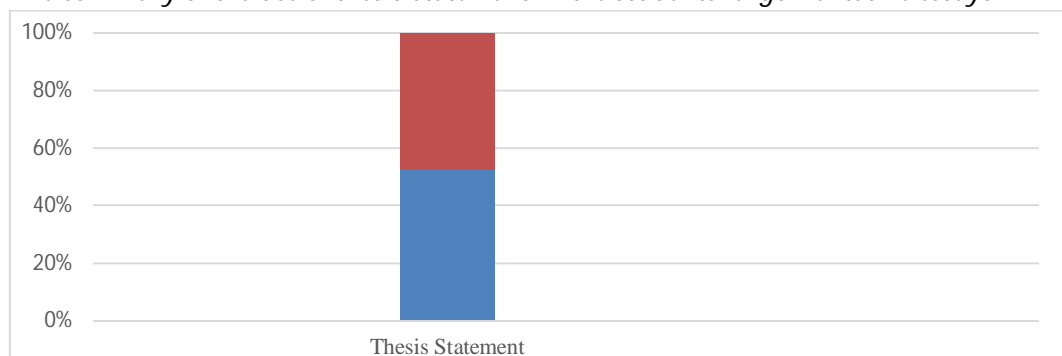*The summary of the use of thesis statement in the students' argumentative essays*

Table 6 and Figure 2 (the blue and red colors in the bar diagram) occupied almost the same size. There were twenty-one (52.5%) students who were able to supply thesis statements, while nineteen (52.5%) students were not able to supply thesis statements. It means that half of the students are able to provide a thesis statement, but the other students are not able to provide a thesis statement.

Excerpt 2 indicates the student's ability to provide a thesis statement in the introductory paragraph of an argumentative essay. For example, Student D wrote her introduction paragraph.

Excerpt 2
Introduction of an argumentative essay written by Student D

Online Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Introduction

   The COVID-19 pandemic which disperses throughout the world brings various changes in various aspects of human life, including the education sector. One of the changes in the field of education is the use of online learning systems. Although online learning is the possible solution during the COVID-19 pandemic, the constraints of online learning cannot be avoided.

As indicated in the excerpt, the student writer explains an issue and thesis statement in the introduction. In the context of an issue, the writer explains briefly how the COVID-19 pandemic changes all aspects of human life including education. Concerning the thesis statement, the writer provides both sides of an issue: those who agree with online learning (the opponents' point of view) and Student D's position as stated in the statement: "Although online learning is the possible solution during the pandemic, the shortcomings of online learning still exist."

Body part

The body part displays dialogical argumentation between the pros and cons of online learning. In this context, counterargument is supported by evidence, and refutation (the writers' arguments) is supported by evidence. Therefore, the body paragraphs should contain counterargument (supported by evidence) and refutation (supported by evidence) as well. The distribution of the occurrences of counterargument 1+ evidence 1 and refutation 1+ evidence 1 in each of the body paragraphs is presented in Table 7.

Table 7

The distribution of the use of counterargument 1 + counterargument evidence 1, and refutation 1 + refutation evidence 1 in body paragraph 1

No.	Body paragraph 1 Counterargument 1 + evidence 1 + refutation 1 + evidence 1	Occurrences	Percentage
1.	Presence	6	15%
2.	Absence	34	85%
	Total	40	100%

In regard to Table 7 (body paragraph 1), out of forty students, six students (15%) supplied counterargument 1, counterargument evidence 1, refutation 1, and refutation evidence 1 in body paragraph 1. While thirty-four students were unable to supply counterargument 1, counterargument evidence 1, refutation 1, and refutation evidence 1 in body paragraph 1. In other words, most of the students did not supply counterargument 1, counterargument evidence 1, refutation 1, and refutation evidence 1 in body paragraph 1.

The summary of the distribution of counterargument 1 + counterargument evidence 1 and refutation 1 + refutation evidence 1 is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3

The distribution of the use of counterargument 1+ counterargument evidence 1, refutation 1 + refutation evidence 1 in body paragraph 1
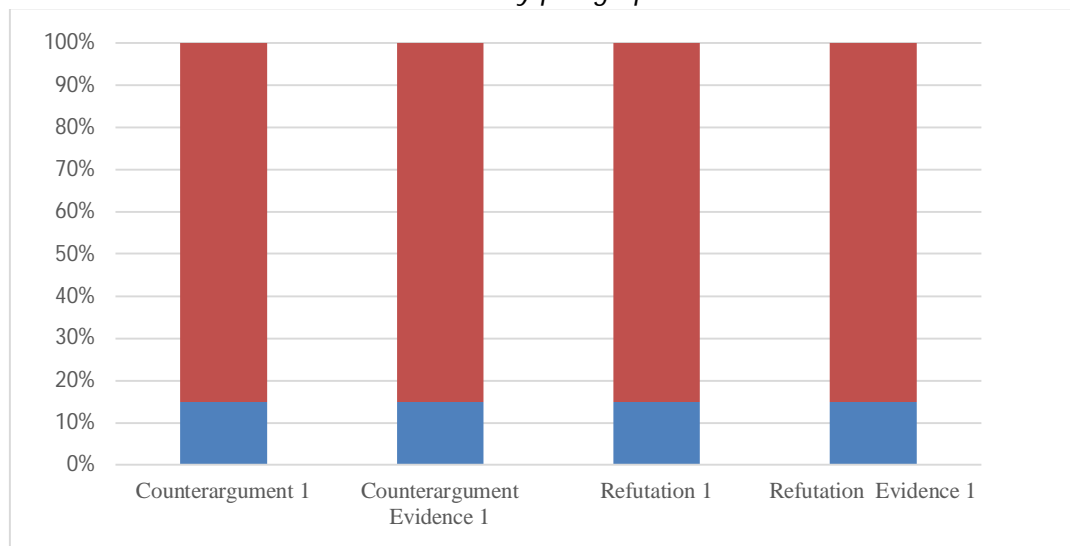

Table 7 and Figure 3 indicated that the red color dominated the areas. This means that most students fail to provide counterargument 1, evidence 1 and refutation 1, and evidence 1. The distribution of the occurrences of the use of

counterargument 2+evidence 2, and refutation 2+ evidence 2 in each of body paragraphs is presented in Table 8.

Table 8

The distribution of the use of counterargument 2, counterargument evidence 2, refutation 2, and refutation evidence 2 in body paragraph 2

No.	Body paragraph 2 Counterargument 2+evidence 2+refutation 2+ evidence 2	Occurrences	Percentage
1.	Presence	6	15%
2.	Absence	34	85%
	Total	40	100%

Of Table 8 (body paragraph 2), out of forty students, six students (15%) students supplied counterargument, counterargument evidence, refutation, and refutation evidence in body paragraph 2. While 34 students were unable to supply counterargument 2, counterargument evidence 2, refutation 2, and refutation evidence 2 in body paragraph 2. In other words, most students did not supply counterargument, counterargument evidence, refutation, and refutation evidence.

The summary of the distribution of counterargument 2, counterargument evidence 2, refutation 2, and refutation evidence 2 is shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4

The distribution of the use of counterargument 2, counterargument evidence 2, refutation 2, refutation evidence 2
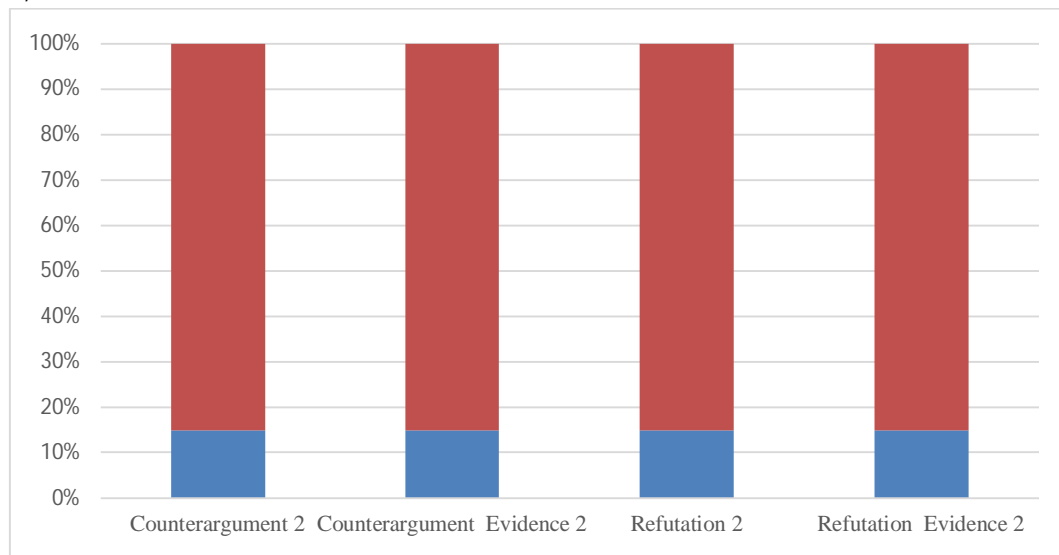
Table 8 and Figure 4 indicated that the red color dominated the bar diagram. This means that most of the students fail to provide counterargument 2; evidence 2 and refutation 2 and evidence2. The distribution of the occurrences of the use of counterargument 3+evidence 3, and refutation 3+ evidence 3 is presented in Table 9.

Table 9

The distribution of the use of counterargument 3, counterargument evidence 3, refutation 3, and refutation evidence 3 in body paragraph 3

No.	Body paragraph 3 Counterargument 3+evidence 3+refutation 3+evidence 3	Occurrences	Percentage
1.	Presence	6	15%
2.	Absence	34	85%
	Total	40	100%

Connected with Table 9 (body paragraph 3), out of forty students, six students (15%) supplied counterargument 3, counterargument evidence 3, refutation 3 and refutation evidence 3. While, there were 34 (thirty-four) students who could not supply counterargument 3, counterargument evidence 3, refutation 3 and refutation evidence 3.

The summary of the distribution of counterargument 3, counterargument evidence 3, refutation 3, and refutation evidence 3 is shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5

The distribution of the use of counterargument 3, counterargument evidence 3, refutation 3, refutation evidence 3
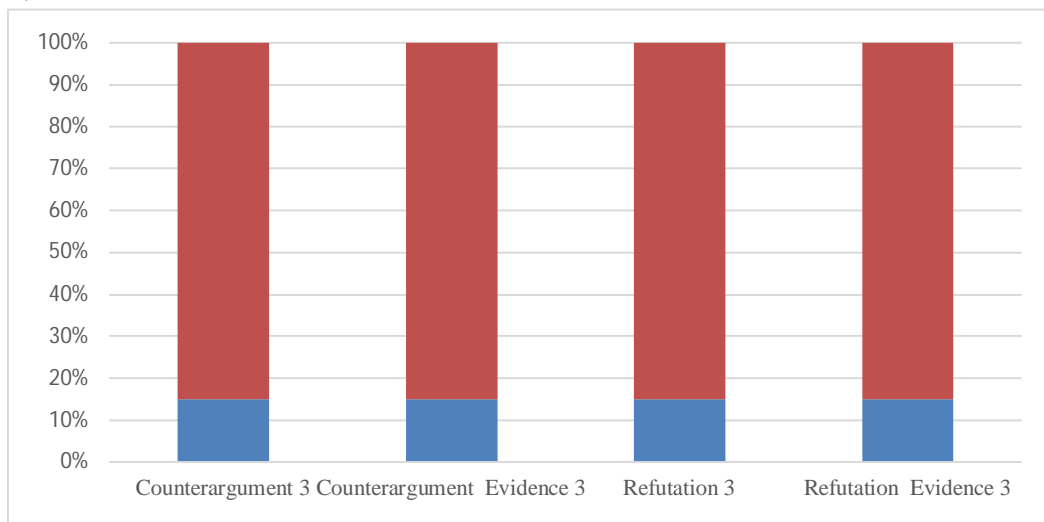
Table 9 and Figure 5 indicated that the red color dominated the areas. This means that most students failed to provide counterargument 3; counterargument evidence 3 and refutation 3 and refutation evidence 3.

Excerpt 3 indicates the students' ability to provide topic sentences in the body paragraph of an argumentative essay. The students wrote two topic sentences for developing two paragraphs of the body part of an argumentative essay. For example, Student P wrote the body paragraph.

Excerpt 3

Body paragraph of an argumentative essay written by Student P

Online Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Body paragraphs

First limitation is related to the students' boredom with online learning in which most of the students' times are spent on facing laptops or gadgets and looking screen for a longer duration of time. If they leave the devices, they miss the important ideas of what has been explained by the teachers.

The second weakness is related to the student's social and emotional bonds with their friends and their teachers. Commonly, in offline learning, the teachers have close emotional bonds with their students because the teachers can greet their students and encourage their students with smiles or other facial expressions, body language, and so forth. These relationships do not happen in an online learning class. A third weakness is related to the troubles of the ICT devices that can appear before or during the teaching-learning process. For example, the voices of the teachers or the students cannot be heard, or the background sound from outside enters, which makes some noises, the screen cannot be opened, and so forth. All of these troubles disturb the communication.

The above excerpt indicated that in the body paragraphs, Student P lists three weaknesses of online learning. In the first paragraph, the student displays the weaknesses related to the student's boredom; the second paragraph has to do with social and emotional bonds and troubles of using ICT devices that take place. However, all the paragraphs in the body did not contain the pattern: counterargument+ counterargument evidence and refutation+ refutation evidence.

Conclusion part

The conclusion is the last part of an argumentative essay, and it contains the conclusion of the whole essay. In conclusion, the writer should rephrase the thesis statement in different words. The distribution of the occurrence of the use of the conclusion is summarized in Table 10.

Table 10
The distribution of the use of the conclusion

No.	Conclusion	Occurrences	Percentage
1.	Presence	13	32.5%
2.	Absence	27	67.5%
	Total	40	100%

About Table 10, out of 40, thirteen students (32.5%) provided appropriate conclusions, and twenty-seven students (67.75%) were not able to provide conclusions. The summary of the distribution of the use of conclusion is shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6
The distribution of the use of the conclusion

The Use of Conclusion

Table 10 and Figure 6 indicated that there were thirteen students (32.5%) who provided appropriate conclusions, and twenty-seven students (67.75%) were not able to provide conclusions. Most of the students were unable to provide a conclusion.

Excerpt 4 indicates the students' ability to provide. For instance, Student P wrote his conclusion paragraph.

Excerpt 4
The conclusion paragraph of an argumentative essay written by Student P

Online Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Conclusion

In conclusion, although government agencies and education experts recommend teachers or lecturers to implement online learning at schools, colleges, and universities, online learning has weaknesses in some aspects.

As indicated above, in the conclusion, Student P reiterates the ideas thesis statement in different words for the conclusion. "Although government agencies and education experts recommend the teachers or lecturers to implement online learning at schools, college and universities, online learning has weaknesses in some aspects." In this case, Student P is able to provide a conclusion.

The quality of the EFL students' argumentative essays

In this part, the discussion of the quality of the students' argumentative essays has to do with fulfilling all elements of an argumentative essay. As mentioned in the blueprint, six elements should be fulfilled. They include (1) explanation of an issue, (2) thesis statement in the introductory paragraph; (3) counterargument 1+ evidence 1+constrasting signal + refutation 1 + evidence 1 in body paragraph 1; (4) counterargument 2+ evidence 2+ contrasting signal + refutation 2 + evidence 2 in body paragraph 2; (5) counterargument 2+ evidence 2+constrasting signal + refutation 2 + evidence 2 in body paragraph 2; (5) counterargument 3+ evidence 3+constrasting signal + refutation 3 + evidence 3 in body paragraph 3; and (6) conclusion.

Based on the results of data analysis, the data of the quality of the students' argumentative essays can be seen in Table 11.

Table 11

The quality of the students' essays

No	Qualification	Score	Numbers of students
1	Excellence	4	6
2	Good	3	4
3	Poor	2	15
4	Very Poor	1	15

In Table 11, six students obtained an excellent qualification or score of 4, four students obtained a good qualification or score of 3, fifteen obtained a poor qualification or score of 2, and fifteen obtained a very poor qualification or score of 1. The summary of the quality of the student's essays is shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7

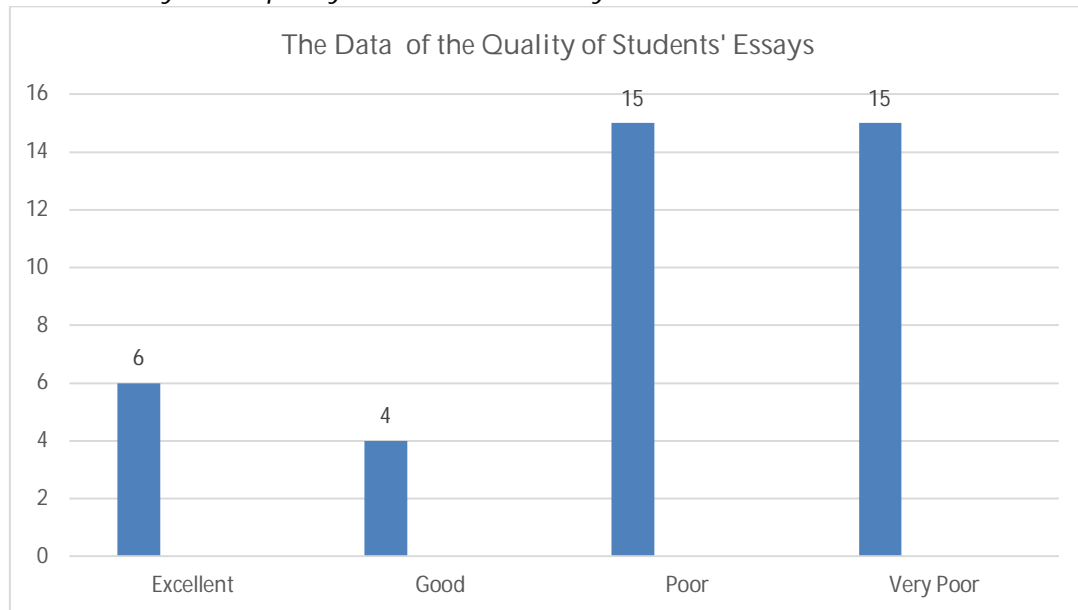*The summary of the quality of the students' essays*

Table 11 and Figure 7 displayed that most students had a poor qualification, followed by very poor. In contrast, the smallest number of the students were at good qualification and followed by excellent.

Discussion

The distribution of the elements of an argumentative essay

As shown by the study results, all the students could write an "explanation of an issue" in the introduction. It indicated that the students had no difficulty writing "explanation of an issue," on the topic "Online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic." There were several reasons why the students could display an "explanation of an issue." First, this issue is a trending topic that is almost discussed by people of all ages, social statuses, educational backgrounds, and nationalities worldwide. Consequently, the students are familiar with the issue. Second, during the pandemic, the students could find information from various online sources. Almost all sources discussed the topic as mentioned. Third, during the pandemic, the students actively participated in the online learning and teaching process. Hence, they had the experience of learning online, allowing them to become familiar with it. Fourth, the topic had two sides, pros and cons;

therefore, raising the issue of online learning for an argumentative essay was relevant to the topic of an argumentative essay.

In terms of thesis statement, out of forty students, twenty-one (52.5%) students were able to write "thesis statement." In contrast, nineteen (47.5%) were not able to write a "thesis statement" in the introduction part. Although the number of students who could write "thesis statement" was greater than those who could not write "thesis statement," the result was still unsatisfactory. Ideally, they should understand the thesis statement because it is the starting point for digging deeper into an issue. In other words, the thesis statement is the early step in exploring a specific issue to be more comprehensive. The thesis statement of an argumentative essay produced by the EFL students are quite specific. It seems slightly different from the statement of Morris (2024) that the thesis statement needs the complications or contradictions of the issues that should be taken into account (Morris, 2024). Thesis statement of an argumentative essay should contain two sides of an issue (Oshima & Hogue, 2007).

In relation to body paragraphs, out of forty students, nine students were able to write "counter arguments + evidence and refutation + evidence." Most students failed to supply "counterarguments + evidence and refutation+ evidence" in each body paragraph. However, out of nine, three students only wrote reasons without refutation. It portrayed the inability of the greater number of students to respond to counterarguments. In the body paragraphs of an argumentative essay, counterarguments + evidence and refutations + evidence should be included simultaneously. Concerning evidence, the students used evidence in the form of examples because the topic is categorized as general knowledge, realistic, and concrete, so that example was easy to present. In terms of conclusion, out of forty students, thirteen (32.5%) students were able to write a conclusion of an argumentative essay. It implies that the number of students who could not write a conclusion is greater than those who could (Prata et al., 2019).

The quality of the EFL students' argumentative essays

After consulting with the rubrics, it was revealed that six students obtained an excellent qualification or score of 4, four students obtained a good qualification or score of 3, fifteen obtained a poor qualification or score 2, and fifteen obtained a very poor qualification or score 1. It means that only six students fulfilled all the requirements: explanation of an issue, introduces the topic, thesis statement of the pattern, counterargument supported by evidence, and refutation strengthened by evidence and conclusion. The ability of the students lies below excellent. The results of this study confirm that the students still have problems

with the element distribution and its quality (Ferretti et al., 2009). An argumentative essay has been affirmed by scholars to be the hardest model in comparison with description, narration and exposition in both L1 and L2 writing (Gleason, 1999; Inglan, 2009; Richards & Schmidt, 2010). However, writing high-quality argumentative essays is not easy for university students (Noroozi, 2016).

There are numerous factors that may cause the poor quality of students' argumentative essays. First, some students may not have enough knowledge of the structure and the features of an argumentative essay (Wingate, 2012). Consequently, they may face problems in employing the features when writing essays (Noroozi et al., 2016). Second, since the nature of argumentative essays could be different across disciplines and contexts (Wingate, 2012), the process of delivering argumentation knowledge from one area to another could be troublesome (see Noroozi et al., 2020; Wingate, 2012). Third, writing an argumentative essay is challenging because it requires advanced, high-order cognitive skills (Riley & Reedy, 2005).

Conclusion

This study investigated the distributions of elements of an argumentative essay produced by the EFL students and the quality of the EFL students in writing argumentative essays. Results showed that in terms of the distributions of elements of an argumentative essay produced by the students, the majority of the students failed to supply a thesis statement, counterargument, refutation in three body paragraphs, and conclusion. Second, regarding the quality of an argumentative essay, only a few students obtained excellent qualification. The other students showed their failure in which they were at a poor qualification, followed by very poor.

Referring to these findings some suggestions can be addressed to the English teachers and the future researchers. First, it is important for English teachers to redesign materials completely, containing detailed explanations of each element of the argumentative essay so that they are able to argue appropriately, effectively, and convincingly. Second, different abilities across different times and different conditions necessitate different strategies. Therefore, the teachers should find out effective strategies. Third, by seeing the weaknesses of the students, it is suggested for the teachers to provide the students with a lot of practices so that they become more skillful in argumentation in a variety of settings.

There are some weaknesses of the study. First, the participants of the study were small in number. Therefore, the study's results cannot be generalized to the larger contexts because the research study was designed to focus on specific groups. It is suggested that future researchers carried studies by recruiting a large number of participants. This will enable them to gather a significant amount of data, which will help them gain multiple perspectives on the complexities of an argumentative essay." Second, since research study was conducted during COVID-19 pandemic, we could not conduct direct interview. Therefore, it is suggested that future researchers conduct interviews with the students to investigate their perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, problems, and so forth related to an argumentative essay. Third, it is important for future researchers to conduct studies that have not been done yet on argumentative essays. These studies may include the writing process, such as pre-writing, drafting, revising, and editing, as well as the students' perceptions of argumentative essays, interventions of certain methods, logical fallacies, topic familiarity, research designs, and so forth in order to enrich fragmentary mosaic of studies of argumentation.

Due to weaknesses of the students, their weaknesses should gain more attention Neglecting any of these can weaken the overall quality of an argumentative essay. All of these elements are interconnected to each other and work together to create a well-crafted argumentative essay. The practical implication of the current study is that the teachers can redesign the materials, find effective strategies for popularizing and teaching the dialogical dimension of an argumentative essay, and provide a lot of practice opportunities. The theoretical implication of the current study is that the current study allows teachers to understand more argumentation as a scholarly approach toward an issue in different contexts and situations.

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Appendix. The rubric for assessing elements of an argumentative essay

Elements	Descriptions
Explanation of an issue	It contains background information that introduces the topic
Thesis statement	It should contain both sides of points of view toward an issue (opposing point of view/ the other side point of view and the writer's point of view). (Langan, 2001)
	The issue should be arguable/debatable, not a statement of fact. (Anderson, 2008; Axelrod & Cooper, 2012; Coffin, 2004)
	Notice the example of a thesis statement as follows:
	Although some parents and educators oppose same-sex classes, there is some evidence that separating boys and girls in middle school yields positive results.

Elements	Descriptions
	(Oshima, 2017)
	The opposing point of view is underlined once; the writer's own position is underlined twice. In the first part, the other side's point of view is included; in the second part, the writer's opinion is stated, suggesting that he shows his point of view.
	The starting point for an argumentative essay is an arguable/debatable issue: whether or not boys and girls are put in separate classes.
	In order to be more effective, the writer can combine both sides of an issue into a complex sentence and use contrast transition signals to show contrast ideas such as *however*, *but*, *although*, and so forth.
	Look other examples of thesis statement as shown below:
	<u>Despite the claims that curfew laws are necessary to control juvenile gangs, curlew laws are clearly unconstitutional.</u>
	<u>Some people feel that the United States should have a national health care plan like Canada's; however, others feel that government should stay out of the health care business.</u>
	<u>Although/Even though many think that genetically engineered crops are a grave danger to the environment, such crops can alleviate world hunger and malnutrition.</u> (Oshima, 2017)
Body paragraph 1	*Counterarguments* Counterarguments refer to opposing viewpoints. Some keywords introduce counterarguments. Look at the examples: "*Opponents....claim that....*" "*Opponents....maintain that....,*" *The final argument advanced by opponents...is that...,*" "*Those who claim that.....,*" and so forth. (Oshima, 2017) *Refutations* A refutation is a response to a counterargument. Some keywords introduce refutations. Look at the examples: "*However, the research is inconclusive.....*" "*However, such an argument completely ignores the fact that children constantly interact with members*

Elements	Descriptions
	of the opposite sex outside school." "However, research supports exactly the opposite conclusion: that discrimination is widespread in mixed classes." (Oshima, 2017)
Body paragraph 2	The following are the examples of counterarguments and refutations. The counterarguments are italicized, and refutations are underlined once: 1. *Opponents of single-sex education claim that test scores of students in all-girl or all-boy classes are not higher than those of students in mixed classes* ("Study"). <u>However, the research is inconclusive.....</u>" (Oshima, 2017) 2. *Opponents also maintain that separate classes (or separate schools) convey that males and females cannot work together. They say that when students go into the workforce, they will have to work side-by-side with the opposite sex, and attending all-girls, or all boys schools denies them opportunities to learn how to do so* ("North"). <u>However, such an argument completely ignores the fact that children constantly interact with members of the opposite sex outside school.</u> (Oshima, 2017) 3. *The final argument advanced by opponents of same-sex education is that it is discriminatory and, therefore, unconstitutional.* <u>However, research supports exactly the opposite conclusion: that discrimination is widespread in mixed classes...</u>" (Oshima, 2017)
Body paragraph 3	*Evidence* May take the various forms. Widodo (2020) classifies evidence into personal experiences /testimonies, common knowledge, facts, examples, experts' opinions /authorities and research finding.
Conclusion	Restatement of thesis statement in different words