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# NON-ENGLISH MAJOR UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING AT MAE FAH LUANG UNIVERSITY THAILAND

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## Abstract
Argumentative writing has always been challenging for the majority of EFL learners across the globe. Many researchers have investigated English major students' difficulties in argumentative writing. However, little did we know about the difficulties non-English major students experienced. Thus, this qualitative study aimed to discover the difficulties faced by non-English major EFL learners taking the English for Communication 2 course at Mae Fah Luang University, Thailand, in argumentative writing and its contributing factors. There were 201 students from 10 different majors from Thailand and Myanmar who were purposely selected as the participants of this study. A closed-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interview were used as the data collection instruments. The data analysis indicates that the majority of the students experienced difficulties in content (generating and developing ideas), grammar (using correct tenses and various sentence structures), organization (creating a claim, convincing evidence, a concluding sentence, etc.), vocabulary (lack of vocabulary and difficulty in using academic vocabulary), and mechanics (spelling, punctuation, and capitalization). Limited practice time, topic unfamiliarity, and pre-university writing class experience are among the contributing factors to these difficulties. This finding demands further research dealing with the recommended strategies to improve argumentative writing instruction in the future.

**Keywords:** argumentative, difficulties, non-English major, writing

## Introduction
Writing is the process of using letters, punctuation, spaces, words, and sentences to express our thoughts and ideas in a readable and acceptable form. There are some writing genres; one of the most common for university students is argumentative writing, which is the most essential writing genre at the university level (Dang, Chau, & Tra, 2020; Ghanbari & Salari, 2022). It is a writing genre that demands the writers express their positions on a topic and support their stance by providing sets of reliable evidence and reasoning (Ozfidan & Mitchell, 2020). The purpose of argumentative writing is to persuade or convince the readers to support or believe in the writer's perspectives (Hyland, 1990; Wolfe, Britt, & Butler, 2009).



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At Mae Fah Luang University (MFU), where this study was conducted, this particular genre is mandatory for English majors and non-English majors. The students are expected to master argumentative writing, as it has significant advantages for their academic lives. At MFU, English is used as the medium for classroom interaction, and students are oftentimes asked to showcase their writing skills in both English and non-English subjects. They are engaged in some activities such as writing reports, essays, and letters, creating slides, and presenting them in English to their lecturers, where their ability to argue and persuade is highly needed. In addition to that, having the skill in argumentative writing is vital for university students, as it will help them convince their peers and teachers to accept their opinion in an academic setting and help them pass global standardized tests such as IELTS and TOEFL (Abdollahzadeh, Farsani, & Beikmohammadi, 2017; Dang et al., 2020). Moreover, according to Ferretti and Graham (2019), having a skill in producing well-argumentative writing is highly needed in a competitive workplace that demands advanced communication skills.

Despite its importance, EFL university students are exposed to limited writing classes and writing practice. Thus, argumentative writing has been confirmed to be the most challenging writing genre (Ferretti, Andrews-Weckerly, & Lewis, 2007; Peloghitis, 2016; Zhao, 2017). The difficulty is caused by the fact that creating argumentative writing is complex and demanding conceptually and structurally in comparison to composing in other genres, as it places cognitive and linguistic demands on the writer (Fajaryani et al., 2021). In addition, according to McCutchen (2011), argumentative writing also requires the writer to have good linguistic, genre, and topic knowledge. If the students do not master these skills well, no wonder they experience difficulties.

A myriad of previous studies dealing with university EFL students' difficulties in composing argumentative writing has been done by several researchers across the world. In Thailand, Ka-kan-dee and Kaur (2014) observed 60 English major students who were trained writers and found out they experienced difficulties in vocabulary, grammar, providing solid evidence, organization, time constraints, organizing ideas, writing a thesis statement, and understanding the topic. In Indonesia, many university students face linguistic, cognitive, and psychological problems in argumentative writing (Rahmatunisa, 2014; Saputra, Jumariati, & Febriyanti, 2021; Setyowati, Agustina, Sukmawan, El-Sulukiyyah, & Mabaroh, 2020). In addition, Indonesian undergraduate students confronted difficulties with insufficient grammar and vocabulary, pitching arguments, writing habits, topic unfamiliarity, and critical thinking (Fajaryani et al., 2021). In Japan, university students experienced challenges with rhetorical features, organization, finding academic evidence, grammar, topic sentences, counterclaims, punctuation, vocabulary, and academic tone (Peloghitis, 2016). In Vietnam, university students face problems with rhetorical features, linguistic competence, organization, thesis statements, inability to provide solid evidence, lack of critical thinking, and concluding sentences (Dang et al., 2020; Toan, Dan, Da, Thi, & Chau, 2020). In Europe, position-taking was difficult for the majority of linguistics students at a UK university (Wingate, 2012), and using sources, organization, language formality, academic tone, and writing thorough argumentation were difficult for Norwegian students (Horverak, 2018). Similar challenges were experienced by many university

students in Iran and Saudi Arabia, as reported respectively by Ghanbari and Salari (2022) and Ozfidan and Mitchell (2020).

The previous studies above have provided ample evidence of the difficulties in argumentative writing among English major students. Little did we know, however, about the argumentative writing difficulties encountered by non-English major students, as there are very limited studies (e.g., Beniche, Larouz, & Anasse, 2021; Ka kan dee, 2017; Kleemola, Hyytinen, & Toom, 2022) regarding this topic. In particular, Kleemola et al. (2022) reported that non-English major students in Finland faced challenges in position-taking. In their journal, Beniche et al. (2021) stated that Moroccan Chemistry and Engineering Science students had difficulties in mechanics, sentence clarity and correctness, vocabulary, arguments, refutation, a concluding sentence, and a thesis statement. Similar research was also conducted by Ka Kan Dee (2017). She observed 60 law students in Thailand and reported that they encountered problems in writing rhetorical features, grammar, academic vocabulary, generating ideas, closing statements, the planning process, creative thinking, and being unaware of what readers expected. Because the availability of the study is limited, knowledge about the non-English major students' difficulties in argumentative writing is still insufficient. Hence, the present study becomes relevant. In addition to that, unlike these studies, the present study examined the non-English-major students from, not only Chemistry, Engineering, or Law but from 10 different majors. The present study also involved a much larger number of research participants. Hence, the study became worthwhile since it gave different results that can enrich the available body of research. This study attempts to fill the gap by examining the following research questions:

1. What are the difficulties faced by the non-English major undergraduate students at Mae Fah Luang University in argumentative writing?
2. What factors contribute to the difficulties faced by the non-English major undergraduate students at Mae Fah Luang University in argumentative writing?

## Method

This study employed a qualitative research design, which enables a researcher to explore, robustly investigate, and learn about social phenomena to build a deep understanding of some dimensions of social life (Leavy, 2023). The researcher conducted this study during the second semester of the 2022–2023 academic year. The population of the research was 201 first-year non-English major EFL students from Myanmar and Thailand from 6 different sections at Mae Fah Luang University (MFU), Chiang Rai, Thailand. They are from 10 different majors who participated in English for Communication 2 (1006135), a mandatory English course for all MFU students. The researcher was their English instructor.

Table 1. Research participants background

| | Categories | N | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Male | 54 | 26.87% |
| | Female | 147 | 73.13% |
| Nationalities | Myanmar | 23 | 11.56% |
| | Thailand | 178 | 88.44% |
| First language | Burmese | 23 | 11.44% |
| | Thai | 176 | 88.56% |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Age | 18 | 17 | 8.46% |
| | 19 | 134 | 66.67% |
| | 20 | 41 | 20.40% |
| | 21 | 6 | 2.99% |
| | 22 | 3 | 1.49% |
| Majors | Aviation Business Administration | 29 | 14.43% |
| | Public Health | 11 | 5.47% |
| | Business Chinese | 31 | 15.42% |
| | Business Administration | 38 | 18.91% |
| | Chinese Language and Culture | 33 | 16.42% |
| | Accounting | 1 | 0.50% |
| | Computer Engineering | 1 | 0.50% |
| | Economics | 20 | 9.95% |
| | International Development | 3 | 1.49% |
| | Law | 11 | 5.47% |
| English | Outstanding | 1 | 0.50% |
| Background | Good | 31 | 15.42% |
| | Average | 123 | 61.19% |
| | Low | 35 | 17.41% |
| | Very Low | 11 | 5.47% |

The researcher employed two research instruments; a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The questionnaire consisted of 21 Likert-scale (5: strongly agree, 4: agree, 3: unsure, 2: disagree, 1: strongly disagree) statements (See Findings and Discussion). To maintain the validity of the questionnaire, the researcher adapted the questionnaires employed in previous studies. The researcher combined some questionnaire statements from previous research (e.g., Ahmed, 2019; Alisha, Safitri, & Santoso, 2019; Toan et al., 2020). To gain richer and deeper information dealing with why content, grammar, organization, vocabulary, and mechanics were difficult for the students, the researcher used an interview. The interview questions were based on the student's answers to the questionnaire. The researcher employed a semi-structured interview because it is simple yet descriptive and allows the respondent to express their ideas. The information gathered from the interview provided data that could not be revealed by the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was filled out by the students after they finished their writing test. After all of the students filled out the questionnaire, the researcher downloaded the results in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Then, the researcher analyzed the result by calculating the number of students' responses to the Likert scale and the percentage.

The researcher interviewed twenty students representing each major. The interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The researcher read the transcription several times and highlighted some excerpts that expressed and revealed the students' argumentative writing difficulties. Then, the highlighted excerpts were extracted by copying and pasting them into five different clusters; content, grammar, organization, vocabulary, and mechanics. Then, the result of the extraction was presented together with the questionnaire result.

## Findings and Discussion

***Difficulties faced by the non-English majors undergraduate students at MFU in argumentative writing***

The data analysis indicates that the non-English major undergraduate students at MFU faced difficulties in the five areas of writing; content, grammar, organization, vocabulary, and mechanics. Here is the result in detail:

***Content***

Table 2. Students difficulties with content

| No | Question | Scale | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | It is easy to find ideas to write | 1 | 5 | 2.49% |
| | | 2 | 102 | 50.75% |
| | | 3 | 21 | 10.45% |
| | | 4 | 58 | 28.86% |
| | | 5 | 15 | 7.46% |
| 2 | It is easy to develop ideas into a supporting argument | 1 | 2 | 1.00% |
| | | 2 | 92 | 45.77% |
| | | 3 | 27 | 13.43% |
| | | 4 | 68 | 33.83% |
| | | 5 | 12 | 5.97% |
| 3 | It is easy to find academic resources or evidence to support our argument | 1 | 2 | 1.00% |
| | | 2 | 97 | 48.26% |
| | | 3 | 21 | 10.45% |
| | | 4 | 64 | 31.84% |
| | | 5 | 17 | 8.46% |

According to the results of the questionnaire shown in Table 2, the answer to Question 1 revealed that the majority (50.75%) and a small number (2.49%) of the students responded that it was difficult and even very difficult, respectively, for them to come up with ideas for writing. The same question also revealed that it was easy (28.86%), very easy (7.46%), and unsure (10.45%) in terms of generating ideas. From the response to Question 2, it can be seen that most students (45.77%) and a small number of students (1.00%) admitted that they experienced difficulties in turning those ideas into a convincing argument. Meanwhile, a few students (13.43% ) were not sure about their ability to develop ideas into arguments. Question 3 showed that it was difficult (48.26%) and very difficult (1.00%) for the students to find scholarly evidence, and 10.45% of them were not sure whether or not finding academic evidence was difficult. These results showed that most students experienced difficulty with the content in argumentative writing.

The result of the interview was in line with the findings above. Some of the students who joined the interview admitted that they encountered difficulties dealing with the content. Here are some excerpts from the students' answers when asked if writing content was difficult for them.

> *Yes. The first hardest part for me. It took about 30 minutes for me to start writing first, the first 30 minutes I started to find the ideas and to think mostly about how should I convince others*. (Student B)

> *I don't know what to write. I was not familiar with the theme or topic at that time so I didn't have ideas for my writing*. (Student F)

*Content I think challenging. At first, I didn't know hmm how to start my argumentative. I just don't know what to write there and evidence from the Internet is also hard. Hard because I had to read and it took time to read.* (Student K)

*I was blank because why…hmm.I don't know why. The topic is difficult for me maybe. I took some time to think about the idea but took time for me. I don't know if my writing is correct or not. I think finding an idea is difficult. After I found the idea, I still didn't know what to write next.* (Student C)

*Content is hard but evidence is…is more difficult. When the topic is…something that I don't know, I am not familiar with it, I don't know the idea to write*. (Student H)

Based on the findings from the questionnaire and interview presented above, the researcher concluded that the majority of the students faced difficulties with content. It was difficult for the majority of the students to generate and develop ideas as well as find academic evidence. This finding is in line with previous research (e.g., Fajaryani et al., 2021; Ghanbari & Salari, 2022; Ka-kan-dee & Kaur, 2014; Ozfidan & Mitchell, 2020; Toan et al., 2020). In particular, Peloghitis (2016) examined teacher-student conference notes given to seven students at a Japanese university and found that it was difficult for the students to find evidence. In Middle-Eastern countries, Ozfidan and Mitchell (2020) analyzed 187 Saudi Arabian university students' argumentative essays and found that the students experienced difficulties in the areas of finding evidence as well as content and development. A similar result was reported by Ghanbari and Salari (2022), who observed 66 Iranian students' essays who finished the Advanced Writing Class. In Southeast Asia, studies in Indonesia (e.g., Fajaryani et al., 2021; Saprina, Rosyid, & Suryanti, 2021), Thailand (e.g., Ka-kan-dee & Kaur, 2014; Ka kan dee, 2017), and Vietnam (e.g., Dang et al., 2020; Toan et al., 2020) correspond to the findings of the present study regarding students' difficulties in argumentative writing content.

***Grammar***

Table 3. Student's difficulties with grammar

| No | Question | Scale | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 4 | It is easy to use tenses correctly in writing an argumentative paragraph | 1 | 8 | 3.98% |
| | | 2 | 97 | 48.26% |
| | | 3 | 48 | 23.88% |
| | | 4 | 39 | 19.40% |
| | | 5 | 9 | 4.48% |
| 5 | It is easy to use various sentence structures in writing argumentative paragraph | 1 | 5 | 2.49% |
| | | 2 | 94 | 46.77% |
| | | 3 | 47 | 23.38% |
| | | 4 | 47 | 23.38% |
| | | 5 | 8 | 3.98% |
| 6 | I need a grammar checker to check my grammar all the time | 1 | 5 | 2.49% |
| | | 2 | 24 | 11.94% |
| | | 3 | 43 | 21.39% |

| No | Question | Scale | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | 4 | 90 | 44.78% |
| | | 5 | 39 | 19.40% |

The questionnaire results dealing with grammar can be seen in Table 3. Based on the responses to Question 4, it was difficult (48.26%) and very difficult (3.98%) for the students to use tenses correctly. Some of them (23.88%) were not sure whether or not they had used proper tenses, and fewer students felt confident dealing with tenses' correctness. From Question 5, it can be seen that it was difficult (46.77%) and very difficult (2.49%) for the majority of students to use different sentence patterns. The number of students who admitted that it was easy to use various sentence structures is smaller. As can be seen from Question 6, nearly half of the students (44.78%) acknowledged the necessity for a grammar checker, and some of them (19.40%) heavily relied on one to help them in argumentative writing.

The interview results dealing with grammar showed a similar trend. Here are some of the excerpts from the students' interview responses when they were asked if grammar was difficult in argumentative writing.

> *Oh, grammar is very difficult for me because yeah you know in Thai education they learn about grammar for 10 years it's very hard but I don't know exactly about grammar. It's very very difficult…to understand.* (Student K)

> *I learned simple, compound, and complex sentences last semester but now I forget them all. Grammar needs a good memory. I cannot remember them. So many things you know like formulas to remember.* (Students A)

> *I think grammar is hard to arrange words into sentences in a grammatical order*. (Student P)

> *Grammar is difficult. I have to remember the what hm after subject is this and this. So when I write, I forget it.* (Student C)

The questionnaire and interview result above indicated that most students faced difficulties with grammar. It was difficult for the students to use tenses correctly and use various sentence structures. Most students were also dependent on the grammar checker platform to assist their writing. These findings align with the results of previous research that has proven that grammar is one of the students' difficulties in argumentative writing. Ka-kan-dee and Kaur (2014) analyzed sixty senior English major students' essays and interviewed them. They reported that most students experienced grammar difficulties. Similar research was carried out by Ka Kan Dee (2017) on 60 law students in Thailand, and grammar turned out to be difficult for them. In line with these studies, Indonesian university students encountered grammar issues regarding formatting words, word classes, and errors in using words and articles (Fajaryani et al., 2021; Rahmatunisa, 2014; Saputra et al., 2021). The research findings reported by Dang et al. (2020), who distributed questionnaires to 90 Vietnamese English major sophomore students at Tay Do University and interviewed some of them, indicated that grammar was one of the difficulties encountered by these students. Similar to this research, Toan et al.

(2020) observed 21 Vietnamese sophomore English major students, and the result was pretty much the same.

***Organization***

Table 4. Students' difficulties in organization

| No | Question | Scale | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 7 | I understand the structure of argumentative writing | 1 | 2 | 1.00% |
| | | 2 | 68 | 33.83% |
| | | 3 | 81 | 40.30% |
| | | 4 | 22 | 10.95% |
| | | 5 | 28 | 13.93% |
| 8 | When I write, I follow the structure of argumentative writing correctly | 1 | 4 | 1.99% |
| | | 2 | 56 | 27.86% |
| | | 3 | 90 | 44.78% |
| | | 4 | 23 | 11.44% |
| | | 5 | 28 | 13.93% |
| 9 | I use transition correctly when I write an argumentative paragraph | 1 | 2 | 1.00% |
| | | 2 | 109 | 54.23% |
| | | 3 | 33 | 16.42% |
| | | 4 | 40 | 19.90% |
| | | 5 | 17 | 8.46% |
| 10 | I can write a good claim | 1 | 4 | 1.99% |
| | | 2 | 107 | 53.23% |
| | | 3 | 25 | 12.44% |
| | | 4 | 45 | 22.39% |
| | | 5 | 20 | 9.95% |
| 11 | I can write a good concluding sentence | 1 | 2 | 1.00% |
| | | 2 | 116 | 57.71% |
| | | 3 | 24 | 11.94% |
| | | 4 | 42 | 20.90% |
| | | 5 | 17 | 8.46% |
| 12 | I can write good evidence | 1 | 3 | 1.49% |
| | | 2 | 100 | 49.75% |
| | | 3 | 28 | 13.93% |
| | | 4 | 60 | 29.85% |
| | | 5 | 10 | 4.98% |
| 13 | I can write a good link (analyzing the evidence) | 1 | 2 | 1.00% |
| | | 2 | 98 | 48.76% |
| | | 3 | 35 | 17.41% |
| | | 4 | 58 | 28.86% |
| | | 5 | 8 | 3.98% |

The response to Question 7 revealed that the majority of students (40.30%) were unsure if they understood the structure of argumentative writing or not. The number of students who admitted they did not understand the structure of argumentative writing is 33.83% which is bigger than the combined percentage of those who admitted they had a good and very good understanding. 10.95% of the learners claimed they had trouble understanding the structure. When the students were questioned if they adhered to the structure of argumentative writing (Question 8), the results showed a remarkably comparable pattern.

The answer to Question 9 revealed that the majority of students (54.23%) did not correctly employ transitions. There were a small number of students who claimed that they confidently (19.19%) and very confidently (8.46%) had used transitions correctly. Meanwhile, 16.42% of students were unsure if the transition they utilized in their argumentative writing was acceptable.

Respectively, Question 10, Question 11, and Question 12 displayed that the majority of the students found it difficult to write a strong claim (53.23%), compelling concluding sentences (57.71%), and convincing evidence (49.75%). The number of students who stated they could write a good claim, good concluding sentence, and good evidence well and very well combined is smaller in percentage. Meanwhile, some students were unsure about their ability to write good claims (12.44%), concluding sentences (11.94%), and evidence (13.93%).

Question 13 gathered information about the student's aptitude for analyzing the evidence, and the answer revealed that 48.76% and 1.00% of the students, respectively, found it difficult and very difficult to do so. Several students (17.41%) were unsure of their ability to analyze the evidence thoroughly. Meanwhile, 28.86% and 3.98%, respectively, of the students acknowledged that they could examine the evidence fairly well and very well.

The interview result supports the result of the questionnaire presented above. Here are some students' interview excerpts dealing with their difficulties in argumentative writing organization.

> *For…a…claim and counterargument must correspond…and..here it's hard to do if the …topic is very hard that is why I used a lot of time to find the information and put it together*. (Student K)

> *Claim and closing were difficult for me. When I studied, I understood but then during then I forgot*. (Student S)

> *For me, organization is difficult because I don't usually write argumentative paragraphs*. (Student W)

> *The claim and how I must end the paragraph were difficult for me. The structure is very new for me.* (Student J)

> *The claim took time to do because my teacher told me to mention the other point of view too in there. It was difficult*. (Student K)

> *I think claim, closing, and mostly when I have to analyze the source I mention are hard to do. It made me nervous because I was afraid to make mistakes*. (Student F)

> *I remember to put hmmm that I forgot to connect one source to my second source., in addition, and and I forgot the other.* (Student F).

The questionnaire and the interview result above indicate that organization was a problem for the majority of the students in argumentative writing. It was difficult for the students to create a claim, analyze the evidence they provided, use

transition, and create an effective closing. The result of this study corresponds with the previous research. Some studies have reported that students encountered difficulties in the organization in general (e.g., Dang et al., 2020; Horverak, 2018; Ka-kan-dee & Kaur, 2014; Saprina et al., 2021; Saputra et al., 2021; Toan et al., 2020). Moreover, students experienced failure in creating a claim, thesis statement, or their position towards the issue (e.g., Beniche, 2021; Ghanbari & Salari, 2022; Ozfidan & Mitchell, 2020; Peloghitis, 2016; Saprina et al., 2021; Toan et al., 2020; Wingate, 2012). A specific study dealing with position-taking in argumentative writing was carried out by Kleemola et al. (2022) at two universities in Finland. They analyzed 196 students' essays from various study programs, and the result showed that the students did not explicitly mention their position (12%), more or less explicit position taking (72%), and consistent position taking (15%) towards the writing topic. An effective concluding statement was also students' difficulties (Beniche et al., 2021; Ka-kan-dee & Kaur, 2014; Ka kan dee, 2017; Ozfidan & Mitchell, 2020; Peloghitis, 2016). In addition, in their studies, Dang et al. (2020 and Fajaryani et al. (2021) also found that the students had difficulties in coherence. Critical thinking also turned out to be one of the issues the students faced (Dang et al., 2020; Fajaryani et al., 2021; Ghanbari & Salari, 2022) that resulted in the student's failure to analyze the evidence they mentioned in their writing.

***Vocabulary***

Table 5. Students' difficulties in vocabulary

| No | Question | Scale | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 14 | I have enough vocabulary to express my ideas in English | 1 | 8 | 3.98% |
| | | 2 | 95 | 47.26% |
| | | 3 | 56 | 27.86% |
| | | 4 | 37 | 18.41% |
| | | 5 | 5 | 2.49% |
| 15 | I know the academic vocabulary to use in my writing | 1 | 6 | 2.99% |
| | | 2 | 105 | 52.24% |
| | | 3 | 40 | 19.90% |
| | | 4 | 39 | 19.40% |
| | | 5 | 11 | 5.47% |
| 16 | I often repeat the same words when I write an argumentative paragraph | 1 | 3 | 1.49% |
| | | 2 | 24 | 11.94% |
| | | 3 | 58 | 28.86% |
| | | 4 | 97 | 48.26% |
| | | 5 | 19 | 9.45% |
| 17 | I often use simple words in writing argumentative paragraph | 1 | 0 | 0.00% |
| | | 2 | 13 | 6.47% |
| | | 3 | 59 | 29.35% |
| | | 4 | 91 | 45.27% |
| | | 5 | 38 | 18.91% |
| 18 | I feel like I always need help from a dictionary or Google Translate when I write an argumentative paragraph | 1 | 3 | 1.49% |
| | | 2 | 31 | 14.42% |
| | | 3 | 45 | 22.39% |
| | | 4 | 66 | 32.84% |
| | | 5 | 56 | 27.86% |

Table 5 shows the questionnaire results regarding the students' difficulties in vocabulary. As seen in the Question 14 response, most students (47.26%) felt they had insufficient ability in vocabulary, a small number of students (3.98%) had very

poor vocabulary skills, and some students (27.86%) were unsure about dealing with their vocabulary mastery. From Question 15, it can be seen that the majority of the students (52.24%) had difficulties in using academic vocabulary, and even 2.99% of them felt it was very difficult to do so. Meanwhile, 19.90% of them were not sure whether or not they had used academic vocabulary in their argumentative writing. This resulted in the majority of students (48.26%) repeating the same words and using simple words (45.27%) during their argumentative writing test, as seen in Questions 16 and 17 respectively. Due to experiencing difficulties in vocabulary, the majority of students were dependent (32.84%) and heavily dependent (27.86) on dictionaries and Google Translate during their argumentative writing test.

The result of the interview showed that the students experienced difficulties in vocabulary. Here are some excerpts from the interview with the students.

> *Vocabulary was difficult because I have a topic about technology. The words sometimes I don't know*. (Student J)
>
> *I feel vocabulary is difficult because I don't know many words*. (Student C)
>
> *Usually, we write in Thai and English, some words are you know, it's difficult I think.* (Student H)
>
> *Vocabulary is difficult. I have only some familiar general words and the argumentative hmm topic in this text is complicated*. (Student K).

These results are in agreement with the findings from the previous studies. There have been several previous studies (e.g., Beniche et al., 2021; Dang et al., 2020; Ka kan dee, 2017; Peloghitis, 2016; Saputra et al., 2021) that reported the students' vocabulary difficulties in general. In particular, (Ka kan dee, 2017) analyzed 60 Law Thai students' essays interviewed them, and confirmed that the students had an insufficient academic vocabulary. A similar result was obtained even when the students were familiar with argumentative writing (Fajaryani et al., 2021). They observed 12 Indonesian English major student teachers by implementing in-depth interviews and all of them admitted they had insufficient vocabulary. In her study, Horverak (2018) observed 83 Norwegian university students' argumentative essays and found out that the students encountered difficulties in academic vocabulary and adjusting the language to the appropriate level of formality. These studies have confirmed that vocabulary was difficult for the students.

### *Mechanics*

Table 6. Student's difficulties in mechanics

| No | Question | Scale | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 19 | I am confident that I can spell every word correctly in writing an argumentative paragraph | 1 | 9 | 4.48% |
| | | 2 | 51 | 25.37% |
| | | 3 | 89 | 44.28% |
| | | 4 | 41 | 20.40% |
| | | 5 | 11 | 5.47% |
| 20 | | 1 | 11 | 5.47% |

| No | Question | Scale | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | I am confident that I can use punctuation (. ,) correctly in writing an argumentative paragraph | 2 | 50 | 24.88% |
| | | 3 | 87 | 43.28% |
| | | 4 | 42 | 20.90% |
| | | 5 | 11 | 5.47% |
| 21 | I am confident that I can use capital letters properly in writing argumentative paragraph | 1 | 4 | 1.99% |
| | | 2 | 61 | 30.35% |
| | | 3 | 89 | 44.28% |
| | | 4 | 27 | 13.43% |
| | | 5 | 20 | 9.95% |

Table 6 provides data dealing with the students' difficulties in mechanics. According to the responses to Questions 19, 20, and 21, the percentage of students who thought spelling, punctuation, and capitalization were very difficult was 4.48%, 5.47%, and 1.99%, respectively. Many students stated that spelling (25.37%), punctuation (24.88%), and capitalization (30.35%) were difficult. The majority of students were unsure of their proficiency in spelling (44.28%), punctuation (43.28%), and capitalization (44.28). Compared to these percentages, a smaller number of students said they felt confident using proper spelling (20.40%), punctuation (20.90%), and capitalization (13.43%). Even though the majority of the students are in the neutral area, more students agreed that spelling, punctuation, and capitalization were difficult for them. Hence, it can be concluded that based on the questionnaire result, mechanics was difficult for the students.

The interview result strengthens the findings gathered from the questionnaire. Here are some excerpts of the students' answers when they were asked about their difficulties in mechanics.

> *Yes…hm..before I wrote the…paragraph…I thought that punctuation would not be that difficult but when I write in the real..I am not sure about some of the punctuation like commas and… I realize that I need to..learn more about punctuation.* (Student M)

> *I will… have a problem with spelling the words because ..ah…I can't remember the words or maybe spell the words correctly.* (Student K)

> *I didn't much care about punctuation when I was young and when I wrote the essays. Actually, it's also important but since I didn't care that much, hmmm now I am a little bit far from those hmm punctuation rules.* (Student S)

> *My difficulty is about the punctuation and I don't know if I use it correctly or not*. (Student N)

> *Yes, my difficult point is full stop and comma. Like this sentence I want to I want to put a full stop, but I want to describe it again. How can I do it? like delete the full stop and put a comma? But I have put commas in 3 places how can I put it again? It's confusing*. (Student P)

Based on the data analysis, although more students expressed their uncertainty, students who experienced difficulties in using the correct spelling, punctuation, and capitalization outnumbered those who felt confident in these three

aspects. Hence, it can be concluded that mechanics was difficult for the students. This finding corresponds with previous studies (e.g., Beniche et al., 2021; Rahmatunisa, 2014; Setyowati et al., 2020). In particular, Beniche et al. (2021) observed sixty-eight Chemistry and Engineering Science students in Morroco and found that they encountered errors in punctuation and capitalization. Rahmatunisa (2014) and Setyowati et al. (2020) analyzed second-year Indonesian English major students' essays and found that punctuation was one of the cognitive problems the students encountered in argumentative writing.

The findings above have successfully detected the non-English major' students at Mae Fah Luang University difficulties in argumentative writing. The majority of them had difficulties in the areas of content, grammar, organization, vocabulary, and mechanics.

***Factors contributed to the difficulties faced by the non-English major undergraduate students at MFU in argumentative writing***

Based on the analysis of the questionnaire and interview results, there are at least 3 major factors that contribute to the non-English major freshmen students at MFU in argumentative writing; limited writing practice, topic unfamiliarity, and pre-university writing experience.

The first factor that contributed to the student's difficulties in argumentative writing was limited writing practice. The English for Communication 2 course provided one meeting for guided writing practice. The English instructor had 3 hours to assist around 35 to 40 students in one class. After this meeting, the students had one week of independent study to prepare themselves for the test day. Some students had actively contacted the instructor to ask for more guidance, yet many did not do so. Here are some excerpts from the students' responses when they were asked if one meeting was sufficient for them to master argumentative writing.

> *No, It's not enough because even if I have to talk about it for every student...I don't think it's enough because hm I have some friends who have difficulties writing simple sentences in English so…since this is not a simple paragraph writing, I don't think ee it ee enough because we have to write this in structure and and students have average English. Hmm, I think this paragraph writing is a bit more of another level because, in the previous weeks, we didn't have to learn that many skills, and then this writing came out in the last week, so I think we will need more time to learn writing. Before writing this argumentative writing I think we should learn the basic writing paragraph first and then learn step by step*. (Student S)

> *I think not because we were told to write. Writing argumentative is something different. Difference means our brain slowing down like oh what is that I think one meeting is not enough for us to write right away. Maybe 2 times or more than 2 times and the teacher check it one by one like face to face and get feedback in more detail because we don't know what the problem is. For me, it will be better if I can know my weakest point in the paragraph so I can practice more.* (Student P)

> *I think it's not enough, but I think it's enough to know the basics and to know the introduction of argumentative writing, but it's not enough for them to understand and make a good paragraph because to make a good paragraph, you need to combine, one must combine many skills, vocabulary, writing, and so many things yeah. So writing is one of the hardest skills so for m. It's not not enough.* (Student B)

Based on the interview excerpts above, due to having a limited meeting for writing practice, the students did not receive adequate guidance from their teacher. This resulted in the students did not fully understand what argumentative writing is. This is in line with the research findings of Kleemola et al. (2022) and Wingate (2012). In particular, in her study, Wingate (2012) distributed a questionnaire to 117 Linguistics freshmen students at a university in the United Kingdom and observed the tutor comments from 60 students' argumentative essays. Her findings addressed that because of not sufficiently taught to the students, the students partially comprehended what argumentative writing requires which contributed to their failure such as in position taking. A more recent study by Kleemola et al. (2022) also confirmed that the students from 2 universities in Finland did not receive enough guidance and experienced similar problems. This indicates that limited writing practice was one of the factors that contributed to the student's difficulties in argumentative writing.

Moreover, topic unfamiliarity became one of the factors that contributed to the student's difficulties in argumentative writing. Here are some excerpts from the students' interviews regarding topic unfamiliarity.

> *I was not familiar with the theme or topic at that time so I didn't have ideas for my writing.* (Student F)

> *I was blank because why…hmm...I don't know why. The topic is difficult for me maybe.* (Student C)

> *When the topic is…something that I don't know, I am not familiar with it, I don't know the idea to write.* (Student H)

> *…if the …topic is very hard that is why I used a lot of time to find the information and put it together.* (Student K)

The excerpts above showed that some students perceived the topic given to them for their argumentative writing test as unfamiliar. It caused them to experience difficulties completing the test. This is in line with Ferretti and Graham (2019) and Wijekumar et al. (2019). They stated that the student's knowledge of the writing topic is one of the strongest predictors of writing quality. In other words, the more familiar the students are with the writing topic, the more likely they are to produce better argumentative writing. It indicates that instructors should provide a topic that students can relate to.

In addition to limited writing practice and topic unfamiliarity, students' pre-university writing instruction contributes to their difficulties in argumentative writing. Based on the questionnaire results, 114 out of 201 non-English major

students at MFU (56.72%) admitted that they did not learn argumentative writing during their pre-university studies. They knew about this genre when they were taking the English for Communication 2 course. This indicates that the majority of the students had relatively low backgrounds and needed to learn argumentative writing. This corresponds with Beniche et al. (2021) who reported that Moroccan Chemistry and Engineering students experienced difficulties in argumentative writing because they were lacking in terms of language proficiency from the previous year.

Based on the findings above, limited meetings or time for writing practice, topic unfamiliarity, and pre-university writing learning contributed to the difficulties experienced by the majority of non-English major students at Mae Fah Luang University, Thailand.

## Conclusion

The data analysis has revealed that a large number of non-English-major freshmen students at Mae Fah Luang University, Thailand, experienced difficulties in argumentative writing. Their difficulties are in the areas of content (generating and developing ideas), grammar (using correct tenses and various sentence structures), organization (following the generic structure, creating a claim, convincing evidence, a concluding sentence, etc.), vocabulary (lack of vocabulary and difficulty in using academic vocabulary), and mechanics (spelling, punctuation, and capitalization). Limited meetings for writing practice, topic unfamiliarity, and pre-university writing experience are among the contributing factors to these difficulties. For future researchers who are interested in conducting a similar study, the researcher suggests analyzing the students' essay samples and interviewing more students for more comprehensive results. The findings of this study call for future researchers to also observe the potential strategies for better argumentative writing instruction.

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