

STUDENTS' GRAMMATICAL PROBLEMS IN DEVELOPING THE PARAGRAPHS OF ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY

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ABSTRACT

This research aimed to determine the grammatical problems found in students' argumentative essays. The type of research used was descriptive research and the data source of this research was argumentative essays written by English Department students. Research data were collected by giving writing assignments and coding sheets. The collected data were grouped based on the research objectives, then described and analyzed to get the actual facts. The research findings showed that some of the grammatical problems that were often faced by students in writing argumentative essays were subject-predicate compatibility, verb forms, verb tenses, plural forms, and word formation errors as well as problems in the use of conjunctions, auxiliary modals and the use of personal subjects. In conclusion, the students still do not understand the concept of grammar well, and it will be difficult for them to produce a good argumentative essay.

Keywords: *Argumentative essay, Grammatical problems, Writing*

INTRODUCTION

Writing is an essential skill to be mastered by students in order to gain success at schools and universities. It is crucial for students since writing leads the students to the academic success at schools. By developing the writing skill, students will gain benefit in writing their paper or essay assignments from a single paragraph and building multi-paragraphs essay.

Unfortunately, many students find writing more difficult than other skills. As Meyers (2004) says, it is more difficult to learn writing both for native and non native speakers. It is because they have to demonstrate the mastery of all writing elements such as content, organization, purposes, vocabulary, and the proper mechanic. In line with Meyers, Stephen and Vygotsky (1986) also say that writing is more difficult to learn than others since it should cover the topic more clearly and in great detail. At this point, the students need to integrate all language elements in order to produce a good writing.

Grammatical accuracy is needed in writing academic texts, such as argumentative essays. As stated by Paltridge and Starfield (2007), level of grammatical accuracy is required in academic writing. Then, Gay, Mills & Airasian (2012) note that the writer should use clear, simple, straightforward language with correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation are expected. Furthermore, Blaxter et al. (2006) mention that one of the easiest ways of making a good initial impression on the readers is to ensure, as far as possible, that the writing is error free in terms of grammar, punctuation and spelling. In other words, grammatical accuracy can influence the readers' impression on the thesis.

Considering the importance of writing, English Department at STKIP PGRI Sumbar has made writing as a compulsory subject to be mastered by students. There are several series of writing courses provided in this department. They are: Paragraph Writing, Essay Writing, and Academic Writing, which cover the knowledge about how to write English texts from various types (start from paragraphs, essay, and papers). Among all of these essays, argumentative essay has become the most important task as they need to use it in exams and papers (Connor, 1987; Ferris, 1994; McCann, 1989; Anker, 2005; and Intraprawat, 2002).

However, writing argumentative essay is not an easy task for students. Argumentative writing is a complex activity in which the writer takes position on a controversial issue and gives reasons and supporting evidence to convince the reader to accept his or her position. Based on the preliminary observation, many grammatical problems were found in the argumentative essay written by the students. It was obtained that there were some tenses used inappropriately in the essays. The result of observation showed that some sentences are lack of agreement between the subjects and the verbs. Thus, a further investigation was required in order to find out the grammatical problems faced by the students in writing argumentative essay.

There are previous studies underlie this present research. Rahmatunisa (2014) conducted the first study, titled "Problems Faced by Indonesian EFL Learners in Writing Argumentative Essay." The research showed that Indonesian EFL learners experienced three types of challenges: language problems, cognitive problems, and psychological problems. As a result, it is strongly advised that the EFL class develop all language abilities in general, and writing in particular, encourage students to use English with the teachers, introduce pair work, peer-correction, and regular use of dictionaries. Marni and Harsiati (2019) performed the second study, titled "Critical Thinking Patterns of First-Year Students in Argumentative Essay." Three critical thinking patterns were discovered in the student's essay as a result of the research, namely pattern I (Inference-Evaluation), pattern II (Analysis-Evaluation), and

pattern III (Analysis-Evaluation) (Interpretation-Evaluation). According to the findings of this study, students' critical thinking patterns were directed toward analytic thinking, which is defined as investigating numerous occurrences by disclosing facts and arguments to make logical conclusions. Finally, Hamed (2014) evaluated the use of conjunctions in argumentative essays submitted by fourth-year undergraduate Libyan students studying English as a Foreign Language. The findings revealed that Libyan EFL students misused conjunctions, with adversative conjunctions being the most difficulties for the students, followed by additives and causals.

Given the relevance of the subject, as well as the lack of studies on students' challenges in the argumentative essay, the purpose of this study is to investigate the grammatical problems in the argumentative essay produced by English Department students at STKIP PGRI Sumbar. The purpose of this research is to identify grammatical problems in students' argumentative essays.

METHOD

A descriptive research was used since it was aimed to seek grammatical problems the students had in developing the paragraphs of argumenative essays. The data were obtained from argumentative essays written by English Department students of STKIP PGRI Sumbar. 24 students were assigned to write an argumentative essay based on the topics given: Online Shopping, Gadget for Children and President Election. The data were attained through a scoring sheet and coding sheets. The techniques used to gather data for this study were divided into numerous parts. First, the researcher assigned a writing task to the students, instructing them to compose an argumentative essay on the themes provided. After assigning the task, the researcher gathered the students' essays and analyzed them to learn about the students' capacity to write argumentative essay paragraphs and other concerns. The researcher then graded the students' arguments essays and identified the difficulties the students had in producing the paragraphs of the argumentative essay.

Following data collection, the researcher examined and found grammatical errors in the students' essays. Several processes were used to examine the data. First, the researcher examined and rated students' writing using the scoring rubric to learn about students' abilities to build paragraphs for argumentative essays. Because the arrangement of the essay was the emphasis of this study, the researcher graded the students' work using the indicators and subindicators suggested by Karen (2007). The researcher employed analytical scoring for

rating composition task, which includes organizational essay level criteria based on analytic scale for rating composition task presented by Brown (1980), as shown below.

- a. Excellent (18 – 20)
- b. Good (15 – 17)
- c. Adequate (12 – 14)
- d. Fair (6 – 11)
- e. Poor (1 – 5)

After obtaining information about the students' abilities, the researcher re-read the work and examined the difficulty they had in building the paragraphs of their argumentative essay. The indicators for the problems were also taken from Karen (2007). After obtaining information about the students' abilities, the researcher re-read the work and examined the difficulty they had in building the paragraphs of their argumentative essay. Karen also provided the signs for the difficulties (2007). The next step was to examine the grammatical issues that the students encountered when writing argumentative essays. In building the paragraphs of an argumentative essay, five indications were employed to examine grammatical errors. They were subject-verb agreement, verb forms, verb tenses, plurals, and faults in word construction. Those indicators were chosen based on Azar's theory (2002). Following that, the researcher examined the issues raised by Hatch's recommended language elements for argumentative essays (1992). To analyze the data, the researcher read each line in the essay, categorized the difficulties based on the indications, and wrote the results on the coding sheet. The researcher described the data descriptively once all of the data had been evaluated. The researcher described the students' difficulties that they face when writing argumentative essays.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the result of data analysis, it was found that the grammatical problems found in the argumentative essay written by English Department students at STKIP PGRI Sumbar is displayed in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Grammatical Problems the students have in developing the paragraph of argumentative essay

No	Grammatical Problems	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
1.	Subject-verb Agreement	137	49%
2.	Verb Forms	57	21%
3.	Plurals	37	13%
4.	Word Forms	35	13%

5.	Verb Tenses	10	4%
Total		276	100%

Table 1 shows that there are 276 grammatical problems found in the argumentative essay written by the students at STKIP PGRI Sumbar. The table show that the most frequent problem made by the students in developing the paragraphs of argumentative essay is related to subject-verb agreement for 49%. Then, the second problem deals with verb forms for 21%. Problems in plurals occupy 13% of the total problems while the problems in the word from errors are 13%. The problem in verb tenses is only for 4% of the total data.

Furthermore, the results of this research also found some problems related to the language features of argumentative essay. Generally, problems related to the language features of argumentative essay found in the students' essay were the problem of the use of personal voice, connectives and modality. The findings about problems in language features can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Problems related to language features of argumentative essay

No	Language Features	Sub Indicators	Frequency (F)
1.	Personal Voive	Pronoun <i>I, you, and we</i>	87
2.	Modality	Can	122
		Will	39
		Must	14
		Should	12
		May	5
		Problems	2
3.	Connectives	Temporal connectives	9
		Causal connectives	29
		Comparative connectives	13

First, this research found that the students frequently used personal voice such as the pronoun *I, we, and you* in their essay, which make their opinions become subjective and also cause weak arguments. Second, the students frequently committed inappropriate use of connectives. The use of comparative connectives such as *however, meanwhile, and on the other hand* was rarely found in the students' essay. Then, temporal connectives were also used less frequently. Moreover, this research found that the students frequently made mistakes in using subordinating conjunctions such as *and, but, and so*, as well as *because* at the beginning of a sentence.

In addition, for modality, the most frequently used modals in the students' essay is *can* which is about 122 times, followed by *will* for 39 times, *must* for 14 times, *should* for 12 times, and at last *may* for 5 times.

The findings of this research is similar to findings from Hamzah (2012) and Utami (2018). They found that the grammatical errors made by the university students in writing is incorrect verbs which were dominated by tenses confusion and lack of subject and verb agreement. The results of this study imply that university students still have insufficient comprehension about the basic grammar rules. They often make mistakes in tenses, word forms, and plurality. It is also supported by the findings of a research conducted by Daarus (2009). He found that the kind of grammatical problems the students have in writing are singular/ plural forms, verb tenses, word choice, subject-verb agreement, and word order. These findings are in line with the statement asserted by Coffin (2003:33). He states that students whose first language is not English often have significant difficulties with some aspects of English grammar that are distinct from the problems that native English speakers have.

In addition, the research findings also reveal that students had problems in the use of personal voice, modality and connectives. This findings are against the theory stated by Hatch (1992). In writing an argumentative essay, a writer should avoid the use of personal voice in order to avoid subjective opinions (Hatch, 1992). As a replacement, it is suggested to the writer to use impersonal voice in writing an argumentative essay in order to state objective opinion to support the writer's argument (Hatch, 1992).

In addition, this finding also confirms that there is no variation in the students' essay. As a result, the writing becomes monotonous. Actually, in writing an argumentative essay, the use of modality indicates the writer's position towards the topic discussed (Hatch, 1992). Thus, as the writer, the students should limit the use of *can* and increase the use of modal *should* and *must* or *have to*.

Basically, the use of grammar is very important since it affects the readers' understanding about the message delivered. That's why as the writers, students need to pay attention to the rules of language that they use in writing. However, the findings of this research and the previous researches demonstrate that students have problems with grammar. These findings support the statement by Blaxter (1996). He says that many researchers, even experienced ones, have problems with grammar, punctuation and spelling when they are writing up.

Related to this, Coffin (2003: 33) state that students whose first language is not English often have significant difficulties with some aspects of English grammar that are distinct from the problems native English speakers have. These problems include choice of articles, word order, preposition, and so on. After that, they do not put main verbs in each sentence, lack of pronoun agreement in the sentences, unclear use of indefinite reference words, or pronouns, and inconsistent use of tenses/ modes. It happens because English has different rules of grammar from Indonesian. The students who are not aware to these different rules will find problems in writing English sentences. This is supported by Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005: 65) who state that this cause happens because there is a confusion between the target language and mother tongue structurally. It is because the features of the two languages are different.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This study shows that there are some grammatical problems found in the argumentative essay written by English Department students; they are subject-verb agreement, verb tenses, verb forms, plurals, word forms, modality, connectives and personal voice. The implication of this research is that students should have more practice in writing an essay, especially argumentative essay. It is implied that the students do not have sufficient understanding about grammar which is proven by the results of this research.

Additionally, it is suggested for English students to improve their grammatical knowledge. They should do more practice in writing especially writing an argumentative essay. Moreover, the lecturers need to assist the students in having grammatical practice. For further research, it is suggested to conduct deeper research about the grammatical problems in the students' essay. The next researchers can investigate other grammatical problems found the essay written by English Deptment students.

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