An Analysis of Argumentative Essays Written by Fourth-Year, English Major Students at Naresuan University: McCann (1989)'s Argumentative Writing Framework

การวิเคราะห์การเขียนเรียงความเชิงโต้แย้งของนิสิตสาขาภาษาอังกฤษ ชั้นปีที่ 4 มหาวิทยาลัยนเรศวร โดยใช้กรอบการวิเคราะห์องค์ประกอบการเขียนเรียงความของแมคเคน (1989)

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to study argumentative essays written by Thai EFL university students. The participants were 51 fourth-year, English major students at Naresuan University. The instruments used were McCann (1989)'s argumentative writing rubric, essay writing scripts, and a semi-structured interview. The results of the study showed that, overall, the students achieved in writing English argumentative essays at the high level (86.2%) by using the framework as a guideline to write an argumentative essay. However, there were a number of students (13.8%) who encountered some difficulties when writing an argumentative essay. Results of the interview data also showed a connection between those who did not achieve in writing argumentative essay with various factors,namely student's background experience in writing, perceptions of argumentative essay, and the McCann's framework.

บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยครั้งนี้มีจุดประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาการเขียนเรียงความเชิงโต้แย้งของนิสิตไทยในมหาวิทยาลัยนเรศวร โดยมีกลุ่มตัวอย่างคือ นิสิตชั้นปีที่ 4 สาขาภาษาอังกฤษจำนวน 51 คน เครื่องมือที่ใช้ คือกรอบการวิเคราะห์องค์ประกอบการเขียนเรียงความของแมคเคน(1989) งานเขียนเรียงความเชิงโต้แย้ง และการสัมภาษณ์แบบกึ่งมีโครงสร้าง จากผลการวิจัยพบว่าในภาพรวมนิสิตสามารถเขียนเรียงความเชิงโต้แย้งได้สัมฤทธิผล คิดเป็นร้อยละ 86.2 อย่างไรก็ตาม ยังคงมีกลุ่มนิสิตจากงานวิจัยครั้งที่ยังไม่ประสบผลสำเร็จในการเขียนเรียงความประเภทนี้ คิดเป็นร้อยละ 13.8 ผลการศึกษายังชี้ให้เห็นว่า ผลสถิติทางการวิจัยมีความเชื่อมโยงกับผลข้อมูลจากการสัมภาษณ์นิสิตกลุ่มที่ไม่ประสบผลสำเร็จในการเขียนเรียงความเชิงโต้แย้ง โดยมีปัจจัยที่ส่งผลหลายด้าน คือประสบการณ์ด้านการเขียนเรียงความ ความเข้าใจต่อการเขียนเรียงความเชิงโต้แย้ง และความเข้าใจต่อกรอบการวิเคราะห์องค์ประกอบการเขียนเรียงความของแมคเคน (1989)

Key Words: argumentative writing, achievement in essay writing, EFL context

คำสำคัญ: การเขียนเชิงโต้แย้ง ค่าสัมฤทธิผลในการเขียนเรียงความ บริบทการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ

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Introduction

From a scholastic point, writing is basically a matter of arrangement, of fitting sentences and paragraphs into prescribed patterns (Silva, 1993). Mastering writing in English provides learners certain jobs, academic achievement, and career advancement within some fields (e.g., Engineering, Social Sciences, and Business). Nowadays, especially in higher education, including academic settings, an argumentative essay is an undeniable required genre for learners to produce in various kinds of tests ranging from national level (e.g., University's test, CET-4, CET-6, TEM-4, TEM-8) to international one (e.g., TOEFL, IELTS).

Argumentation is also important in a workplace as individuals may try to persuade others to support their opinions or proposals regarding their careers duties(Qian, 2010). For writing, it is crucial to convince people to believe and to accept the point of view on a certain topic from the writer. Hyland (2003) indicates that for non-native speaker learners, argumentative writing is not simply to obtain. In line with Yang and Sun (2012) who state that "it has been affirmed by researchers to be the hardest model to compose, in comparison with description, narration, and exposition, in both L1 and L2 [or EFL] writing" (p.33). Furthermore, the argumentative writing is always a problematic issue for non-native learners because of the differences in terms of linguistic and rhetorical aspects (Ferris, 1994). One weakness in writing the argumentative composition is that students often have a lack of knowledge of its structure and fail to compose reasons to state their standpoints (Crowhurst, 1987, 1991). This finally leads into a poor organization of the argumentative essay related to the inappropriate style of writing such as the registers of language and wrong connectors. As found in the literature review, there are a number of EFL writing research proposing various frameworks which can be well-applied in writing classrooms (e.g., Berman, 1994; Hyland, 2007; Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2008; Mungungu, 2010; Qin & Karabacak, 2010). However, there is still a need for a study using another more reliable and practical writing framework for higher education to analyze the students' compositions.

Therefore, the present study aims to use McCann (1989)'s argumentative writing framework to assess students' argumentative essay writing. The framework contains its writing rubric to assess an effective argumentative writing, including argumentative writing instructions in regular classroom learning and teaching (McCann, 2010, 2012). There are six elements proposed in the framework: Claims, Data, Warrant, Proposition, Opposition, and Response to opposition.

Objectives of the study

The aims of this study consisted of two purposes: (1) to analyze student's argumentative written scripts by using McCann (1989)'s argumentative writing framework and (2) to overall report the patterns found in the participants' writing

in terms of descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and frequency) and information from interview data.

Research questions

1. To what extents do EFL Thai learners achieve in writing English argumentative essays?

2. What are the factors of weaknesses found in the students' argumentative essays?

Methodology

Participants

In the first phase, they were 51 fourth-year English major students, Naresuan University, Thailand who took the course 205424 (Research Report Writing) in the academic year 1/2014. In the second phase, after analyzing the data, 8 students whose argumentative essay total scores were lower than 50% were selected to join the semi-structured interview.

Research instruments

This study utilized three research instruments as follows:

1. McCann (1989)'s argumentative writing framework was used as a tool to assess 51 participants' written scripts. The rubric consists of 6 writing elements (see Fig. 1).
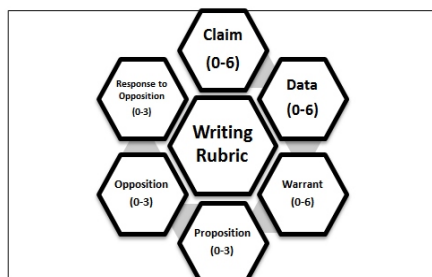

Figure 1 McCann (1989)'s argumentative writing framework

2. The argumentative essay writings written by 51 participants which was an impromptu writing test embedded in the course 205424 (Research Report Writing) were used. The participants were required to write one page essay or at least 400 words within 2 hours. The given topic was entitled "*Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: studying in an English-speaking country is the best way to learn English*".

3. The semi-structured interview conducted by the researcher and lasted for 25-30 minutes. It provided the researcher with in-depth information for the students' perceptions toward argumentative writing and the framework used in the study. Some of the questions used were: Is it your first experience to learn argumentative essay writing? What were your problems in writing this?

Then, a pilot was also conducted with a group of English major students in academic year 1/2013in order to validate all the instruments and the lesson plans. The three experts were asked to check how well the lesson plans and the instruments for the Item-Object Congruence Index (IOC). Next, the researcher employed Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient to evaluate the inter-rater reliability of the two native English teachers who rated the data in the pilot study phase. After calculating the data, it was found that Cronbach's Alpha was 0.681 which indicated the acceptable reliability.

Data collection

After the pilot study was complete, the data collection had two phases. For quantitative data, the

argumentative lesson plans were applied into the writing class, 205424 (Research Report Writing) by an experienced instructor in a field of teaching English writing. The lessons had teaching plans for three weeks as shown below, covering the teaching of essay background, argumentative essay, and its structures based on McCann (1989)'s argumentative writing framework.

- **Week 1**

  1. Introduction to argumentative essay

  2. McCann (1989)'s argumentative writing framework

  3. Steps to write an argumentative essay

  4. Practice session under the topic *"Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: it is better for children to grow up in the countryside than in a big city."*

- **Week 2**

  1. Discussion on practicing topic

  2. Q & A session

- **Week 3**

  1. Writing test under the topic: "Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: studying in an English-speaking country is the best way to learn English."

After that, 51 written scripts were collected and analyzed by the two native English teachers. For qualitative data, 8 students were interviewed and audio-taped. The researcher then transcribed the interview data. The analysis of data was presented in the following section.

Data analysis

For the quantitative data, the researcher coded the written scripts from A1-A51. After being

trained how to properly rate all the written scripts, the two native English teachers who experienced in teaching English writing individually rated the data using the scoring rubric from McCann (1989)'s argumentative writing framework. The inter-rater reliability among the two raters was 0.537. The Correlation is also significant at the 0.01 level. Then, the data were analyzed by using SPSS program to find descriptive statistics such as mean, standard deviation, and frequency. After calculating the essay total scores, for the qualitative data, the interview transcripts from eight participants were analyzed and grouped into categories to make a connection between the essay scores and the participants' opinions toward argumentative essay writing.

Results

Both quantitative and qualitative data answered the two following research questions:

1. To what extents do EFL Thai learners achieve in writing English argumentative essays?

As shown in Table 1, McCann (1989)'s argumentative writing framework scoring rubric was used to assess the 51 written scripts. From the comparison of those six elements in Table 1, for the top three elements, "warrant" was used at the highest level (mean score=4.90). Then, it followed by "claims" and "data" which the mean scores were 4.88 and 4.39 respectively, at the medium levels. For "proposition", it was used at the fourth level in the essay (mean score=2.68). It was followed by "opposition" (mean score=2.19) whereas "response to opposition" was used at the low level (mean score= 1.73).

In terms of a minimum and a maximum score for each element, "claims", "data", "and warrant" had a minimum score of 2 and maximum

score of 6. For "proposition" and "opposition", they contained a minimum score of 1 and maximum score of 3. The last element which was "response to opposition" contained a minimum score of 0 and a maximum score of 3. In addition, according to the total score as can be seen in Table 1, the total score of argumentative essay written by fourth-year, English major students was 20.76. Overall, by using the McCann (1989)'s argumentative writing elements, the minimum score was 12 and the maximum score was 27 which was in a high level.

Table 1 Comparison of descriptive statistics of the six elements used in argumentative essay

	Claims	Data	Warrant	Proposition	Opposition	Response to Opposition	Total score	No. of Subjects
Mean	4.88 (6)	4.39 (6)	4.90 (6)	2.68 (3)	2.19 (3)	1.73 (3)	20.7647	
Std. Deviation	1.052	1.002	1.118	.498	.412	.681	3.88761	
Minimum	2	2	2	1	1	0	12	51
Maximum	6	6	6	3	3	3	27	

*The numbers in parentheses refer to perfect or complete scores in each category.

Based on McCann (1989)'s argumentative writing framework, for "claims", "data", and "warrant", their scoring categories are 0 = poor, 2 = fair, 4 = good, and 6=excellent. For "proposition", "opposition", and "response to opposition", their scoring categories are 0 = poor, 1 = fair, 2 = good, and 3 = excellent.

In terms of details for each element, as shown in Figure 2, there were 26 participants (50%) or 26 students who achieved the excellent scores for the use of "claims" in their argumentative essay writing. Only 10% or 5 participants used "claims" at the level of fair. The Figure 2 also shows that 40% of the participants (20 students) used "claims" at good level.
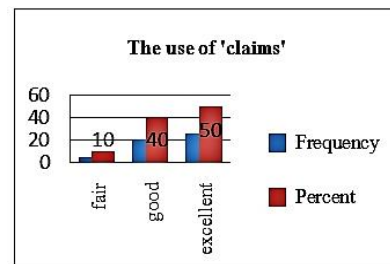

Figure 2 Frequency and percentage of "claims" used in the argumentative essay

In Figure 3 below, for "data", most of the participants (63%) or 32 students used "data" at good level whereas 10% employed the "data" at the fair level. For excellent level, it contained only 14 participants (27%) or 14 students.
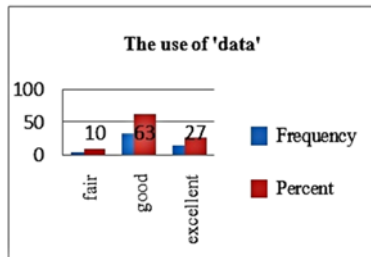
The use of 'data'

Figure 3 Frequency and percentage of "data" used in the argumentative essay

From Figure 4, 28 participants (56%) used "warrant" at the excellent level while using "warrant" at fair level appeared to be least frequently used (10%).
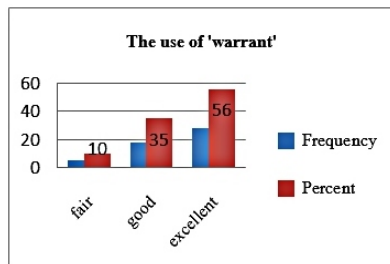
The use of 'warrant'

Figure 4 Frequency and percentage of warrant used in the argumentative essay

According to Figure 5, the use of "proposition" received the highest level of use by 33 students (66%) at excellent level while only 3% of the participants or 2 students used at fair level. The rank orders of the use of "proposition" in argumentative essay writing are: 1) excellent level (66%), 2) good level (32%), and 3) fair level (3%).
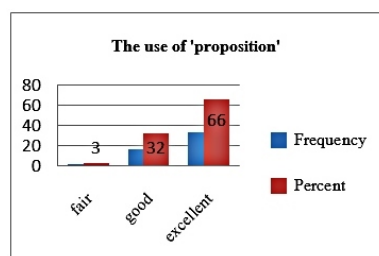
The use of 'proposition'

Figure 5 Frequency and percentage of "proposition" used in the argumentative essay

Figure 6 below shows the use of "opposition" which received the highest frequency of usage for good level (67%) or 34 students whereas using "opposition" at poor level gained the lowest frequency (2%) or one student.
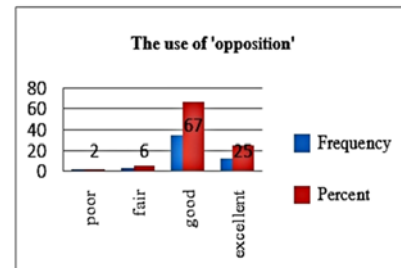
The use of 'opposition'

Figure 6 Frequency and percentage of "opposition" used in the argumentative essay

For the use of "response to opposition", as shown in Figure 7, the most frequently used for "response to opposition" was in good level (55%) or 28 participants. On the other hand, the least frequency used which received only 6% was using "response to opposition" at poor level.
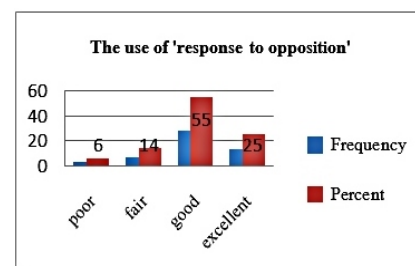
The use of 'response to opposition'

Figure 7 Frequency and percentage of "response to opposition" used in the argumentative essay

2. What are the factors of weaknesses found in the students' argumentative essays?

Data from interview were employed to answer this question. It was found that there are four main factors played a significant role to students' writing. In this part, the participants were coded into

S1-S8 (S stands for student) in the interview data description. Each factor is discussed in details below.

1. Regarding the interviewees' writing backgrounds and experiences, it was found that they received some different writing courses when studied in the university. For example, for S1 took only 3 writing courses (Basic Writing, Paragraph Writing, and Research Report Writing) whereas S3 took 5 writing courses (Basic Writing, Paragraph Writing, Essay Writing, Creative Writing, and Research Report Writing).

2. For the interviewees' perceptions of argumentative essay writing, the understanding of an argumentative essay was common to all participants. Moreover, to write an effective argumentative essay writing, they informed that seven factors below were faced: (a) experience in learning argumentative essay, (b) worry, (c) grammatical concern, (d) logic division of thoughts, (e) vocabulary, (f) topic, and (g) timing. Statements in the following paragraphs are some examples of their reflection.

> S3: "I have a major problem with grammar. For example, to write an effective argumentative essay, there is a need to compose some difficult sentences using adverbial clause, noun clause, or even adjective clause to make the essay look more professional. But I cannot make it. I have a big problem concerning this point."

> S7: "Vocabulary sometimes is hard to prepare. It is just a personal storage and also depends on his/her experience. If we have used English vocabulary often, we can choose many words to write in the essay.

> However, for me, I need more academic words to write in my essay."

3. For the interviewees' perceptions toward McCann (1989)'s argumentative writing framework, it was revealed that the top three elements that they correctly understood were: claims (62.5%) or 5 interviewees, data (87.5%) or 7 interviewees, and proposition (75%) or 6 interviewees whereas the top three problematic elements that they did not understand were: response to opposition (87.5%) or 7 interviewees, opposition (62.5%) or 5 interviewees, and warrant (62.5%) or 5 interviewees.

4. There also were some suggestions and conclusions for English writing courses the interviewees revealed their writing experiences in the university. A great number of participants (41.6%) or 4 interviewees indicated that they needed more grammatical session in the classes, followed by writing practice lessons (25%) mentioned by 2 interviewees, vocabulary improvement (16.6%), logical idea writing practice (8.3%), and also interaction between instructors and learners in classes (8.3%).

Discussion and conclusion

The discussions of the results of the study are divided into two parts as follows.

1. From an analysis of argumentative essay writing (research question one), it was found that a large number of participants (86.2%) received their scores higher than 15. However, there were 13.8% of all participants who received the scores lower than 15 points. It is quite clear that by using the McCann (1989)'s argumentative writing framework (with the six argumentative writing elements), the students tended to achieve their argumentative essay writings. The elements that were correctly understood and used

were: "claims", "data", "warrant", and "proposition" whereas the problematic elements the participant did not understand and used incorrectly were: "response to opposition" and "opposition". Such a finding corresponds to the results of previous studies (McCann, 1989; Knudson, 1992; Qin & Karabacak, 2010) which indicated that "claims", "data", and "proposition" are the elements did not cause writers' difficulty in writing an argumentative essay. In contrast, the most problematic element was "response to opposition" among the students in all levels in the study. In addition, in the current study, it was found that how the uses of these elements are related to the overall quality of argumentative essay writings. The overall essay scoring tended to be increased if the students employ all the six elements in their argumentative essays. Thus, the McCann (1989)'s framework can be used as an alternative argumentative structure in learning and teaching essay writing which is proved to be reliable and practical according to the finding in the study.

2. Concerning research question two, the results showed that there are a number of factors which influenced ways to write an effective argumentative essay such as writing background, understanding of argumentative essay and its structure, including essay writing facilitation (writing practice and interaction in the classrooms). These findings supported the previous study (Uysal, 2012). From the researcher point of view, the factors emerged from the current study are all influential factors causing weaknesses in argumentative writing, especially for EFL students. One example can be explained by the participants' writing backgrounds. As most of them reported that it was their first time learning to write an argumentative writing, and it required them to write differently from what they have learned before. The interview data may also shed light on "cultural context" for the students when they write their argumentative essay. As confirmed by Uysal (2012) which mentioned that, in his study, cultural background affected not only organizational textual features, but also argument structures. According to the interview data, it was found that many students admitted that Thai language frequently interfered with English argumentative essay writing. Perhaps, this is the reason why they wanted to have more writing practice sessions in class in order to be more familiar with English essay writing. For other related factors investigated from the interview data, the interviewees referred to a group of factors such as grammatical matter, vocabulary, and logic division of thoughts which are all interesting issues in the future directions of English essay writing teaching and learning in higher education, especially in university context.

Acknowledgements

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