

## Myanmar EFL Learners' Perspectives, Structure, Reasoning and Literacy Practices of Argumentative Writing: A Needs Analysis Study

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### ABSTRACT

Enhancing proficiency in argumentative writing in English has always been a challenge for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Despite the widespread use of argumentative essays in international tests such as International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and Tests of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) in recent years, the learners usually fail to meet satisfactory achievement levels in the EFL context. This paper investigates the issue closely by reviewing Myanmar EFL learners' needs, wants, and problems in developing argumentative writing. Although there has been some discussion on factors that potentially challenge EFL learners' argumentative writing, more research is needed on the integrated assessment to cater to the learners' needs. This analysis reports the results of a group of undergraduates (n=44) in Myanmar. This research was based on triangulation data, including sources from questionnaires administered to the students' purposes, preferences, and challenges, and analyzing students' argumentative writing structurally and qualitatively for reasoning. The findings reveal that students were eager to learn argumentative writing, particularly for their immediate needs. Though students were not well trained with a communicative teaching approach in their curriculum, they preferred to learn argumentative writing dialogically, using classroom debates. They favored learning future argumentative writing courses by communicating meaningfully. Regarding the challenges in argumentative writing, most students could not produce counter-arguments and rebuttals. Based on the data elicited from the students, this needs analysis proposed implementing the integrated learning-to-argue and arguing-to-learn instructions and using argumentative literacy practices to engage students in dialogic learning in the EFL context.

**Key words:** EFL, Undergraduates, Argumentative Writing, Literacy, Needs Analysis, Myanmar

### INTRODUCTION

Argumentative writing, a genre regularly used in assessing academic English (Plakans & Gebiril, 2017), is a crucial skill that students across all disciplines require for enrollment in higher education and their educational achievements (Hyland, 2013). The argument is highly valued for critical thinking and success across disciplines (Hirvela, 2017). Argumentative writing has been recognized as proof of critical thinking skills since writers need to analyze, evaluate, and counter-arguments with logical justification in order to convince readers (Hashemi et al., 2014). Mitchell (2000, p. 146) also highlights that "a defining characteristic of a good student at the undergraduate level is success in argumentative writing." Concerns about preparing students for the modern workplace have also gained interest in their argumentative writing, and students are expected to construct and evaluate claims (Ferretti & De La Paz, 2011). These expectations are reflected in the significant importance of argumentative writing in worldwide education, and an emphasis on teaching and learning how to compose argumentative texts

continues to grow. Higher education in the UK also emphasizes transferable argumentative skills in first-year undergraduates (Andrews et al., 2006). In the landscape of the second language (L2) writing field, argumentative writing was one of the major topics conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (Hirvela & Belcher, 2021). According to the educational demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts have increasingly recognized the ability to compose argumentative essays as an important mode of written discourse. For example, the assessment of argumentative writing is observed in a high-stakes English language examination in China called Test for English Majors Band 8 (Liu & Stapleton, 2014). Therefore, it can be said that the capacity to write argumentative essays effectively has been the central focus in L1, L2, and the EFL contexts.

Along with rapid globalization, EFL students are expected to develop arguments in internationally recognized tests. However, they encounter many challenges in both L1 and L2 argumentative writing (e.g., Qin & Karabacak, 2010;

Abdollahzadeh et al., 2017; Altinmakas & Bayyurt, 2019; Saprina et al., 2021; Sundai & Febriyanti, 2021). Writing an argumentative essay is a double burden for EFL students whose first language is not English (Hyland, 2013). Many students in different EFL contexts experience difficulties in constructing argumentative essays, for instance, in China (Liu & Stapleton, 2014; Bychkovska & Lee, 2017), in Indonesia (Saputra et al., 2021; Tasya, 2022), in Iran (Ghanbari & Salari, 2022), in Japan (Peloghitis, 2017), in Myanmar (MayOo & Eto, 2023) and in Thailand (Ka-kan-dee & Kaur, 2015). EFL learners are frequently described as having limited capacity to write well-organized arguments with clear and relevant evidence and demonstrate their opinions about a given topic or issue along with the opposing views.

Many studies have researched students' argumentative abilities by examining the first language (L1) background (e.g., Yoon, 2021), writing experiences in both L1 and L2 languages (Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2008) and the second and English as a foreign language (L2/EFL) (e.g., Qin & Karabacak, 2010; Peloghitis, 2017). The results of the empirical studies have highlighted the lack of adequate and effective instruction for the deficiencies in argumentation skills (both in L1 and L2 context) (Butt, 2010; Hirvela, 2017; Majidi et al., 2021; Walker & Kettler, 2020). Traditionally, the instructions in EFL writing courses tend to provide learners with a focus on lexical, syntactic, and linguistic resources; as a result, EFL teachers seem to pay more attention to the writing rules (Johns, 1997). To move beyond the structure of argumentative writing, students are encouraged to apply argumentative literacy practices through various social practices and receive feedback from audiences (Nystrand et al., 2001). However, there is a significant gap between what research findings recommend as effective approaches and how educators are practically teaching argumentative writing in classrooms.

In the EFL context, a comprehensive approach is needed to address the root cause of undergraduates' problems in writing argumentative essays. Previous studies have mainly concentrated on these factors independently:

- students' perceptions of their difficulties in argumentative texts
- the frequency of argumentative structural elements
- the reasoning quality of their arguments in the EFL context

To fill the research gap and portray a more comprehensive picture of EFL learners' challenges, the present needs analysis combined all these factors in an integrated study and explored the EFL learners' performance in textual structures (quantity), their reasoning with the acceptance and relevance of arguments (quality) along with the EFL undergraduates' perceptions about effective argumentative writing and investigated the extent of well-structured arguments are qualitatively sound in their reasoning. The results of this study aim to promote some suggestions to develop undergraduate EFL students' performance in argumentative writing.

### Objective and Research Questions

The needs analysis study examined Myanmar EFL undergraduates' performance and perceptions of argumentative

writing. Furthermore, it explored the students' challenges that might have shaped students' performance and preferences regarding argumentative writing. Despite the perceived importance of EFL writers' needs analysis, the literature appears not to have fully addressed the gap by investigating the learners' self-evaluation along with the structural analysis and reasoning quality of argumentative writing. To address these limitations, the present study explored the students' self-assessments, argumentative writing performance, and preferences for argumentative activities. This study was guided by four research questions as follows:

1. What are the Myanmar EFL undergraduates' purposes and motivations for learning argumentative writing?
2. What are the students' self-assessments toward the challenges in argumentative writing?
3. To what extent do the undergraduate students in Myanmar write argumentative essays well-structured and qualitatively sound in their reasoning? And are the students' self-evaluations related to their actual argumentative writing performance?
4. What are the students' preferred classroom literacy activities for future argumentative writing courses?

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Needs analysis is "concerned with identifying general and specific language needs that can be addressed in developing goals, objectives, and content in a language problem" (Richards & Rodgers, 1986, p.156). By understanding the learners' needs, educators can choose the appropriate learning materials, activities, and instructions while the goals and objectives established by teachers clarify the instructional purpose for learners, as highlighted by Nuan in 1988. To assist EFL learners in improving their argumentative texts, the present study aimed to identify strengths and weaknesses in students' writings, pinpoint the EFL classrooms' particular struggles, and propose possible solutions to overcome the challenges by investigating several sources from the students.

The learners' performance in writing is considered more challenging for non-native EFL writers (Javadi-Safa, 2018). While composing texts poses difficulties for many learners (Graham & Perin, 2007), those who are foreign language learners are particularly challenged (Hinkel, 2011; Silva, 1993). EFL learners also face various difficulties when it comes to writing in English, particularly in argumentative writing. This issue may be crucial for less proficient writers (Siekman et al., 2022; Yang & Sun, 2012). So far, research has rarely focused on these learners, and insights into students' struggles with writing well-argued essays by analyzing their needs are scarce.

Peloghitis (2017) explored the obstacles of undergraduate first-year Japanese students that they experienced in writing argumentative essays. Although the study could offer valuable insights into the troubles the EFL students may encounter, it examined only a small number of seven participants, resulting in difficulty in applying in other contexts. Additionally, the research method of Peloghitis (2017) was focused only on students' perceptions; the researcher

suggested including the data analysis of composing argumentative essays. Hence, the present study was designed to address the limitations.

Although the number of studies investigating the performance of EFL learners' argumentative writing has been on the rise, a subset of the existing research examines teacher-related factors such as their perceptions and attitudes towards argumentative essays in the target language (Ene & Sparks, 2020). It is understandable why the previous needs analysis was primarily based on the crucial role of teachers because teachers could shape the teaching-learning process well. However, students' needs and expected learning goals should not be neglected, as understanding their actual performance can assist teachers in designing an effective curriculum that meets the needs of their students. Under such circumstances, future research will be required to investigate students' needs and perspectives on argumentative writing before experimenting.

The mainstream research in EFL writing is overloaded with a wealth of pedagogical information on how to improve the (structure) of argumentative writing (Bacha, 2010; Zheng, 2013). Given the research in the EFL context devoted solely to the surface structure of argumentative writing, this situation leaves writing teachers and learners with limited options but to focus on the trend. Not accounting for applying argumentative writing as a tool unlocks the potential of EFL writers. EFL learners' difficulties with argumentative writing have largely been approached from the textual perspective (mainly from the written products). Few studies have examined the challenges from the (learners' perspective) by eliciting input from EFL writers (e.g., Ghanbari & Salari, 2022; Peloghitis, 2017). However, understanding the hurdles and needs from the writers' points of view is essential to provide relevant information for the writing teachers to offer intensive additional instruction (Torgesen, 2007).

There is still a vastly underdeveloped body of pedagogical scholarship regarding the needs analysis of EFL writers (Husain & Nggawu, 2022). Previous needs analysis overlooked to investigate the students' wants, although they explored students' needs and lacks. The present study of needs analysis attempted to include both needs and wants of students' writing performance, particularly argumentative writing. Specifically, this study investigated what argument skills Myanmar EFL learners need to compose argumentative essays quantitatively and qualitatively (both structure and reasoning) and identify students' favorable argumentative literacy practices for future courses. Along with the claim of Newell et al. (2015) that teaching and learning of argumentative writing can offer students access to high literacy, this needs analysis can be a helpful contribution to literacy education research and classroom practice in the EFL context.

## METHOD

### Research Design

This needs analysis adopted a mixed-method approach to investigate Myanmar EFL undergraduates' performance

and perceptions of argumentative writing, using quantitative and qualitative data collection. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), a mixed-method approach is preferable when a single method cannot provide a complete picture. This study compared the students' self-evaluation questionnaire data toward argumentative essays with the finding of textual analysis from writing performance. The broad categories developed through qualitative coding of the open-ended question regarding students' expectations and preferences of argumentative writing and their expectations were used to determine what kind of argument instruction may be effectively implemented in the EFL context.

### Participants

By applying convenience sampling, this study was composed of 44 freshmen EFL students (40 female and four male) ages ranging from 17 to 18 who voluntarily enrolled to participate. The students were majoring in English at a public university in Myanmar. The participants' first language was Myanmar, and each had roughly 12 years of English instruction before entering the university. The freshmen group was selected on purpose because their perceptions and argumentative writing performance fit the objective of the study.

### Data Collection Tools

The students' needs for argumentative writing were collected using questionnaires and a task to write an argumentative essay after signing consent forms (See Appendix A). The needs analysis items in the questionnaire were adapted from the study of Newell et al. (2015). The questionnaire items were also developed based on the needs analysis framework of Hutchinson and Waters (1987). The questionnaire consists of three sections (see Appendix B). Initially, the participants' personal information was collected, such as their age, gender, and experience of writing argumentative essays in Myanmar and English, and English and taking international tests (IELTS, TOEFL, etc.). Section I (necessity) mainly examined students' purposes for learning argumentative writing. Section II (lacks) investigated the students' self-evaluation of argumentative elements, and the questions were modified from Newell et al. (2015). The participants were asked to rate their ability to use argument elements on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (Very difficult) to 5 (Very easy). Section III (wants) included the Likert questions about the participants' favorable learning activities for the future argumentative writing classes, and one open-ended question asking their suggestions for improvement, and other comments about the future argumentative writing courses. Two well-experienced EFL teachers piloted this modified questionnaire to check if the questions were appropriate for the EFL context in Myanmar.

The instructions for the writing task are as follows: Write a *for-and-against essay* (an argumentative essay) with the title "When traveling, which is better, by cars or planes? The familiar topic was chosen since the students were assumed to have no previous experience writing argumentative essays. The time allocation was 50 minutes for the 250-word essay,

and students were restricted from using mobile phones and dictionaries.

### Measurement of Argumentative Writing Performance

In measuring the performance of argumentative writing, research has primarily focused on two dimensions: structure and quality of reasoning. While previous studies have analyzed argumentative texts utilizing structural elements proposed by Toulmin (1958, 2003), this study aims to go beyond these structural elements and assess the content quality as well.

When applied in the EFL context, the Toulmin model comes with certain limitations and weaknesses. Among the concerns, the complexity of the model is the primary constraint for EFL students already struggling with language complexities. Using all six argumentative components, claims, evidence, warrants, backing, qualifiers, and rebuttals, can be overwhelming and hinder their ability to understand and apply the model effectively. Moreover, being rooted in Western philosophical and rhetorical traditions, the Toulmin model might be challenging for EFL students to grasp its underlying assumptions.

Considering these limitations, this study applied Qin and Karabacak's (2010) rubric, which was originally based on the adapted Toulmin (2003) model and Nussbaum and Kardash (2005), to identify the argumentative elements in EFL students' essays. The adopted rubric takes a more detailed approach by subdividing counter-arguments into their counter-argument claims and counter-argument data, and rebuttals into their rebuttal claims and rebuttal data. This more detailed analysis is expected to provide a deeper understanding of argument structures and substructures, resulting in increased reliability in recognizing the structures (Bracewell & Breuleux, 1994).

This study analyzed six argumentative elements: claim, data, counter-argument claim, counter-argument data, rebuttal claim, and rebuttal data. The definitions of the elements, as originally presented by Ramage and Bean in 1999, and example arguments from participants' essays can be found in Table 1. The coding scheme for argument structural elements in Table 1 was designed following guidelines applied in previous studies (Nussbaum & Kardash, 2005; Qin & Karabacak, 2010; Stapleton & Wu, 2015) originally based on Toulmin (2003).

The main reason for choosing these six elements for analysis was their frequent use in relevant studies and their reliable identification in argumentative writing, as evidenced by prior research by Chuang and Yan (2022), Crammond (1998), McCann (1989), Ye and Wang-Hiles (2021) and Zou et al. (2021). By utilizing this rubric, the instructors can assess argumentative essays more objectively and provide valuable feedback to EFL learners to enhance their ability to construct well-structured arguments. Inter-rater reliability of rated essays for claims, data, counter-argument claims, counter-argument data, rebuttal claim, and rebuttal data was .92, .89, .87, .83, .85, and .81 respectively. For the issue of discrepancy in identifying argumentative elements between raters, data were negotiated until a consensus was obtained.

### Quality of Argumentative Reasoning Argumentative Writing

The previous studies applied mainly to Toulmin model, while effectively addressing the argumentative structure, have faced criticism for not considering the argument quality. Sampson and Clark (2008) emphasized that a strong argument depends on structure and content quality since an accurately structured argument can still be weak if the reasoning content is flawed. Therefore, solely focusing on the surface structure while overlooking the reasoning quality in the content might lead to an incomplete assessment of argumentative effectiveness. This notable difference was highlighted in the study of Stapleton and Wu (2015), which analyzed argumentative essays composed by high school students in Hong Kong. The study's findings showed that having a well-structured argument does not always indicate the quality of reasoning.

Therefore, in this needs analysis, the assessment of argumentative writing explores not just the EFL learners' performance in textual structures but also the quality of reasoning in argumentative writing. Scholars in informal reasoning have introduced a framework to assess argument quality by employing expert judgment on two key criteria: The acceptability of arguments and the relevance of reasons (Means & Voss, 1996; Schwarz et al., 2003). Acceptability is evaluated based on the argument's logical structure and how realistically it is presented (Schwarz et al., 2003), whereas relevance examines how well the reasons support the conclusion (Means & Voss, 1996). This present study applied the two criteria, relevance, and acceptability, by following the approaches in previous studies (Stapleton & Wu, 2015; Chuang & Yan, 2022).

## RESULTS

Regarding the questions of students' previous experience in learning argumentative writing, none of the students had such experience in both the Myanmar language and English language at their high schools and university curricula. However, about one-third of the participants (15 freshmen) were found to be preparing to take international tests such as TOEFL or IELTS. Hence, students may have learned argumentative writing for exam-oriented purposes at cram schools. Since most of the participants lack the experience, they are likely to encounter challenges in composing argumentative writing.

### Research Question 1: The Purpose and Motivations for Learning Argumentative Writing

The findings of the participants' purpose for learning argumentative writing are presented in Table 2. They were tasked to indicate on a 5-point Likert scale (1= Strongly disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Neutral, 4= Agree, 5= Strongly agree) how important they considered argumentative writing to be to their current studies, future career, international tests such as TOEFL or IELTS, as well as in the development of critical thinking skills, and debate skills. The results suggest

**Table 1.** Coding argumentative structural elements

Argumentative structural elements	Definition and examples from student writing
Claim (C)	An assertion in response to a contentious topic or problem -... <i>Traveling by car is more advantageous than going by plane nowadays.</i>
Data (D)	Evidence to support a claim. It can take various forms, such as facts, logical explanations, and suppositions. -... <i>What is more, the ticket prices for the express are low in contrast to the airplane tickets.</i>
Counter-argument claim (CC)	The possible opposing views that can challenge the validity of a writer's claim -... <i>However, if we travel to long distances like foreign countries such as China, America, London... etc.; plane is better than car.</i>
Counter-argument data (CD)	Evidence similar to the "data" above to support a counter-argument claim -... <i>For example, travelling to Yangon from Mandalay by planes will take at most 1 hour while travelling in a car will take more than 7 hours, or maybe the whole day.</i>
Rebuttal claim (RC)	Statements in which the writer responds to a counter-argument -... <i>Although cars are not convenient for long distances, it has more advantages than traveling by planes.</i>
Rebuttal data (RD)	Evidence to support a rebuttal claim which include the identification of possible weaknesses in the counter-argument claim, data or assumptions, such as logical fallacies, insufficient support, invalid assumptions and immoral values (Ramage & Bean, 1999) -... <i>Although using cars for travelling has many good points, there are also some uncomfortable facts. Unless the cars' windows open, we can't get the enough oxygen than the normal situation and it can cause headaches and others.</i>

**Table 2.** Students' ratings of the importance of argumentative writing (in ascending order of mean score)

Items	Mean	SD	Valid Percentage of Student Ratings*				
			1	2	3	4	5
Argumentative writing is important for international tests such as TOEFL or IELTS.	3.82	0.95	0	11.4	20.5	43.2	25.0
Argumentative writing is important for classroom debate skills.	3.64	0.53	0	0	38.6	59.1	2.3
Argumentative writing is important for my current studies.	3.39	0.65	0	9.1	43.2	47.7	0
Argumentative writing is important for my future career.	2.86	0.93	6.8	29.5	34.1	29.5	0
Argumentative writing is important for critical thinking skills.	2.20	0.73	13.6	56.8	25.0	4.5	0

\*Rating scale: 1=Strongly disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly agree

that students are motivated to learn argumentative writing due to the immediate need for international tests. The score of learning argumentative writing for the standardized tests is the highest, with a mean of 3.82, and more than 68% of the students found this genre of writing important, scoring 4 (Agree) or 5 (Strongly agree). Students also mentioned the need to learn argumentative writing for studying abroad (comment from the open-ended question). While the need for developing classroom debate skills is slightly lower (M= 3.64, 61%), it is slightly higher than the need for current undergraduate studies (M= 3.39, nearly 48%). Students find little interest in the requirement of argumentative writing for future careers, presenting an average score of only (M= 2.86, nearly 30%). The questionnaire result generally indicates that students' imposed needs for learning argumentative writing are relatively low for enhancing critical thinking skills (M= 2.20, nearly 5%).

### Research Question 2: Students' Self-assessments Toward the Challenges in Argumentative Writing

We listed six elements of argumentative writing for which students expressed their difficulty level on a scale from

1 (Very difficult) to 5 (Very easy) as displayed in Table 3. The findings suggested that students experienced greater difficulty in counter-arguments and rebuttals than claims and data. The mean level of the students' confidence toward the claim was 3.77, and more than 61% of the students considered writing the claim to be easy, scoring 4 (easy) or 5 (very easy). This is the highest mean score among all aspects of argumentative writing, followed by rating their abilities to write supportive evidence for their claims (M= 3.52, 59%) and the abilities to compose counter-arguments (M= 3.25, 57%). In contrast, students self-evaluated their skills lower at evidence against their opposing arguments (M= 2.93, 34%). Concerning the rebuttals, the students posed greater difficulty. In particular, the students found it challenging to respond to counter-arguments for rebuttal claims (M=2.11, only 9% of the students found the skill easy) and evidence for rebuttal data (M=1.57, 2%).

### Research Question 3: Well-structured Arguments and their Sound Quality in Reasoning

The surface structure and quality of reasoning of all 44 scripts were analyzed, resulting in three distinctive profiles to

highlight the quality of reasoning in arguments as shown in Tables 4, 5, and 6. The findings revealed that even when the surface structure of the arguments was relatively good, the quality of reasoning did not necessarily follow the pattern. For

**Table 3.** Students' ratings of argumentative writing elements (in ascending order of mean score)

Argumentative Elements	Mean	SD	Valid Percentage of Student Ratings				
			1	2	3	4	5
Writing clear standpoints or effective claims of argumentative writing (claims)	3.77	0.94	0	9.1	29.5	36.4	25.0
Writing supportive evidence for the main claim or argument (data)	3.52	0.79	2.3	6.8	31.8	54.5	4.5
Writing opposing statements of claims (counter-argument claims)	3.25	0.97	4.5	22.7	15.9	56.8	0
Writing supportive evidence against counter-arguments (counter-argument data)	2.93	0.97	9.1	22.7	34.1	34.1	0
Writing statements to respond to counter-arguments (rebuttal claims)	2.11	0.97	31.8	34.1	25.0	9.1	0
Writing supportive evidence against rebuttal claims (rebuttal data)	1.57	0.73	54.5	36.4	6.8	2.3	0

Rating scale: 1=Very difficult, 2=Difficult, 3=Neutral, 4=Easy, 5=Very easy

**Table 4.** Frequency of features of one-sided arguments used in the essays (n= 8)

Quality of reasoning	Frequency	Percent
Level 5 Provide multiple sound reasons/ free of irrelevancies	3	37.5
Level 4 Provide multiple reasons; most of them are acceptable	3	37.5
Level 3 Provide one to two reasons/ some are weak and some are sound	2	25
Level 2 Provide only one reason/ weak or irrelevant reason	0	0
Level 1 Provide no relevant reason to support	0	0
Total	8	

**Table 5.** Frequencies of features of two-sided arguments used in the essays (n=29)

Quality of reasoning	Claim-data (C-D)		Counter-argument claim (CC)- Counter-argument data (CD)	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Level 5 Provide multiple sound reasons/free of irrelevancies	2	6.90	0	0
Level 4 Provide multiple reasons; most of them are acceptable	12	41.38	1	3.45
Level 3 Provide one to two reasons/some are weak and some are sound	12	41.38	9	31.03
Level 2 Provide only one reason/weak or irrelevant reason	3	10.34	14	48.26
Level 1 Provide no relevant reason to support	0		5	17.24
Total	29		29	

**Table 6.** Frequencies of features of two-sided arguments used in the essays (n=7)

Quality of reasoning	Claim-data (C-D)		Counter-argument claim (CC)- Counter-argument data (CD)		Rebuttal claim (RC)- Rebuttal Data (RD)	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Level 5 Provide multiple sound reasons/free of irrelevancies	0	0	0	0	0	0
Level 4 Provide multiple reasons; most of them are acceptable	3	42.86	0	0	0	0
Level 3 Provide one to two reasons/ some are weak and some are sound	2	28.56	2	28.56	2	28.56
Level 2 Provide only one reason/weak or irrelevant reason	2	28.56	2	28.56	4	57.14
Level 1 Provide no relevant reason to support	0	0	3	42.86	1	14.29
Total	7		7		7	

persuasive argumentative essays, it is necessary to compose good surface structures considering alternative viewpoints and their weaknesses. Based on the results from Levels 4 and 5 of the three argument profiles, only 16% of the students (7 out of 44 students) could apply well-structured arguments along with sound quality in reasoning. Considering the findings from the students' self-assessment of their argumentative writing performance in research question 2, the students seem to realize their deficiencies in writing opposing arguments and rebuttals. This understanding can be helpful for enhancing the students' argumentative writing quantitatively and qualitatively.

### **Profile 1: One-sided Good Surface Structure But Weak Argument Quality: Failure to Include**

#### **Counter-argument**

As shown in Table 4, the first profile represents argumentative essays (n=8) with a one-sided argument structure, including a claim with at least one corresponding reason. The quality of the supporting reasons for the claim was rated from no relevant reason to multiple sound reasons. The majority of the one-sided arguers could provide multiple acceptable reasons that are free of irrelevancies for the claims at Level 5 (37.5%, n=3) and Level 4 (37.5%, n=3). Generally, the arguments were strong in terms of soundness as only a quarter of the arguers at Level 3 (25%, n=2) supplied with one reason, weak or irrelevant to the claim.

### **Profile 2: Two-sided Good Surface Structures but Weak Argument Quality**

The second profile represents two-sided structures consisting of arguments and counter-arguments as illustrated in Table 5. Among the three clusters, this profile includes the highest number of essays (n=29) with features for their own claims and reasons and opposing standpoints with the corresponding data. As can be seen in Table 5, nearly 7% (n= 2) of the arguers succeed in producing sound reasons with very strong data for supporting claims. However, no arguers could supply counter-arguments with multiple reasons relevant to their standpoints at Level 5. Though over 41% (n=12) of the arguers supported their claims with acceptable evidence, only a small number, about 4% (n=1) of the students, provided multiple sets of data for accepting their counter-claims. At Level 3, the arguers included only one reason and the weak or irrelevant reasons (over 41% and 31%, respectively) for both claims and counter-argument claims. Interestingly, nearly 50% (n=14) of the arguers failed to support their counter-claims with strong or acceptable data, whereas about 10% (n=3) of the writers failed to support their claims with relevant evidence. For the case of providing no relevant reason to support, no students used such evidence for claims, and 17% (n= 5) of the arguers did for their counter-claims.

### **Profile 3: Two-sided Good Surface Structure but Weak Argument Quality (Rebuttals Included)**

As described in Table 6, the third profile includes all six argumentative elements. According to the adapted Toulmin

model, these essays can be considered good in surface structure. However, the quality of their supporting reasons was far from satisfactory. None of the arguers succeeded in producing very strong data for claims, counter-claims, and rebuttal claims. Their highest performance started from Level 4, which supported the claims with acceptable reasons (nearly 43%, n=3). Surprisingly, at Level 3, the same number of arguers (over 28%, n=2) provided one to two reasons for their claims, counter-argument claims, and rebuttal claims; some were sound and acceptable, and some were weak and irrelevant. It is noteworthy that the rebuttals were aligned with counter-arguments. Assessing the reasoning quality of only one reason that was not strong or relevant was for claims and counter-claims (over 28%, respectively). However, the highest frequencies were observed at Level 2 (57%, n =4) in rebutting the counter-arguments. The evidence for counter-argument claims and rebuttal claims were rated as not relevant and acceptable (43% and 14%, respectively).

### **Research Question 4: The Students' Preferred Classroom Literacy Activities for future Argumentative Writing Courses**

The questionnaire investigated what students desired to learn in future argumentative writing courses as shown in Table 7. Students evaluated the possible helpfulness of the different ways of learning about argumentative writing from 1 (very unhelpful) to 5 (very helpful). Students regarded classroom debate as the most preferable and the most helpful (M=3.68), and 64% of the students assumed this classroom activity to help them learn argumentative writing, scoring 4 (helpful) or 5 (very helpful). Correspondingly, 43 percent of the students preferred pair work for future argumentative writing classes (M= 3.14), but nearly 32 percent felt group work would be helpful (M=3). For the rest of the classroom activities, students prefer teacher-centered (M=2.84, 27%) slightly more than individual learning (M=2.57, 18%).

Regarding the open-ended question of the students' suggestions and comments about the future argumentative writing class, a large number of the students mentioned their wants and needs regarding argumentative texts. As shown in Table 8, many students considered this genre of writing to be important for taking international tests and studying abroad. Additionally, they mentioned that they were not very happy to write argumentative essays without an audience. Some students also mentioned their preferred active teaching activities, in other words, learner-centered approach. The undergraduates were not satisfied with the traditional lecturing method. Based on the students' responses, several themes emerged as follows.

## **DISCUSSION**

The present study investigated the needs analysis of Myanmar EFL undergraduates' argumentative writing and explored their perceptions and performance of the arguments. Adopting a mixed-method approach, this study explored two data sources: the questionnaire and textual analysis of

**Table 7.** Students' ratings of preferred classroom literacy activities (in ascending order of mean score)

Preferred teaching activities	Mean	SD	Valid Percentage of Student Ratings				
			1	2	3	4	5
Classroom debate	3.68	0.86	2.3	4.5	29.5	50.0	13.6
Pair work	3.14	0.85	0	29.5	27.3	43.2	0
Group work	3.0	0.91	9.1	13.6	45.5	31.8	0
Teacher-centered lecturing	2.84	0.89	4.5	34.1	34.1	27.3	0
Individual	2.57	0.95	13.6	34.1	34.1	18.2	0

Rating scale: 1=Very unhelpful, 2=Unhelpful, 3=Neutral, 4=Helpful, 5=Very helpful

**Table 8.** Students' comments from the open-ended question for the future argumentative writing class

Category	Frequency
Eager to learn argumentative writing for international texts	16
Eager to learn argumentative writing for studying abroad	9
Unhappy to write argumentative essays without an audience	8
Unhappy to learn argumentative writing with the teacher-centered approach	6
Eager to learn argumentative writing interactively by using communicative activities	5

argumentative essays. This study also examined the structural elements and the reasoning applied in argumentative writing by the participants. The findings received from the students' perceptions of argumentative writing and their problems in composing the essays revealed that Myanmar EFL students suffer from considerable challenges in various aspects of argumentative writing. Last but not least, our study investigated the EFL undergraduates' preferred literacy practices for future argumentative writing courses.

Based on the study's findings, it can be generally concluded that most of the students in our study rationalized this situation by positioning the need for taking international tests as the most important and immediate reason for learning argumentative writing. The results agree with the expectations of EFL students by Zou et al. (2021) that argumentative essays are the essence of taking their internationally recognized tests. This finding is well supported by Reichelt (2005), who proposed that writing instruction in the EFL context is mainly exam-oriented. Along with the claim of Tin (2014), the researcher stated that the goal of learning English in Myanmar has been in demand for studying or working abroad and reinforcing the current studies in schools.

One possible explanation of the findings is that Myanmar students in our study also take argumentative writing as a helpful indicator for enhancing their language proficiency scores in international exams, such as TOEFL and IELTS. Specifically, the responses from the open-ended questionnaire also support the idea that the majority of Myanmar EFL undergraduates recognize the importance of argumentative

writing as a requirement for studying abroad. Hence, the ability to write argumentative essays effectively can be regarded as the immediate need for EFL learners to prepare for their future studies and careers beyond Myanmar's borders.

Looking on the bright side, the prospects to apply argumentative writing beyond the EFL classroom for students' immediate future can be best served as a needs-driven enterprise for their motivation. On the other hand, the question item of perceiving argumentative writing for enhancing critical thinking received the lowest mean for agreement. Under such premises, EFL teachers should make students aware that argumentative writing has a broader goal of fostering in-depth learning and critical thinking rather than the purpose for exams.

Over 61% of Myanmar EFL students acknowledged the necessity of classroom debate for their argument composition. Notably, in answer to the research question of preferred literacy practices for future argumentative writing classes, classroom debate was also favored as the most preferred one for their learning. This finding is supported by previous research that claimed classroom debates as a promising teaching method that can enhance students' abilities in reasoning and constructing persuasive arguments (Majidi et al., 2021; Malloy et al., 2020; Oros, 2007; Zorwick & Wade, 2016).

Students' responses revealed a crucial point about their preferred learning practices for future argumentative writing classes: they chose classroom debate, group work, and pair work over teacher-centered instruction. This is an important issue to take into consideration because the nature of English writing instruction and participants' previous EFL writing practices is mainly dependent on teachers. Similarly, language teaching in universities in Myanmar is still heavily reliant on traditional teaching methods, such as lecturing (Nwet, 2017). This can be attributed to several factors, including the highly centralized and exam-oriented education system and the lack of autonomy for universities due to decades of military rule (Hayden & Martin, 2013).

However, the findings of our study are different from the previous research. Regardless of the long-standing tradition of lecture-based teaching, the new findings of this study suggest that Myanmar EFL undergraduates seem willing to adopt student-centered approaches. In our study, the potential of students' preferences for dialogic activities such as in-class debate, pair work, and group work rather than traditional lectures can be supported by the proposal of Vygotsky (1981) that through engaging in interactive dialogues with peers,



students can subsequently employ the thinking when crafting their written work. As noted in the open-ended question about their preferred learning style for future argumentative writing classes, students also mentioned that they did not want to compose argumentative texts without an audience. This aligns with the idea of Dickson (2004), who claimed to integrate writing and debate to achieve the real purpose of writing and practicing the students' skills in front of an audience. According to Majidi et al. (2021), the students' expectation of audience-centered argumentative tasks is aligned with their inclination toward in-class debates because debate pedagogy also focuses on catering to the audience's needs, enhancing students' ability to compose persuasive arguments, and leading highly engaged cognitively in the learning process and acquisition of academic literacy.

In our study, Myanmar EFL learners' favorable attitude towards audience-centered argumentative writing tasks and classroom debate is likely to improve their challenging argumentative writing skills, particularly counter-arguments and rebuttals. Findings from the present study revealed that most students were confident in generating claims along with supportive evidence for their standpoints, suggesting that students have no particular difficulty in using primary argumentative elements. The students included mostly basic elements, namely, claims and supporting evidence. Similarly, these primary elements are also the most favorable ones for learners (Lunsford, 2002; Qin & Karabacak, 2010; Varghese & Abraham, 1998; Zhang, 2018). Although the students in our study felt confident to compose counterarguments in their essays, their responses to their counter-arguments were less confident and not every argumentative essay included counter-argument claims, counter-argument data, and rebuttals. One potential reason for this could be the cognitive challenges associated with creating counter-arguments and rebuttals, which are more challenging to generate (as suggested by Wolfe et al. in 2009). Additionally, the writers may not have enough experience or an understanding of how these elements enhance the quality of arguments. Moreover, they may view counter-arguments and rebuttals as optional when writing persuasively.

We can also claim that it is common for students to argue better for their own opinions than for opposing viewpoints. This phenomenon, known as *myside bias*, has been widely demonstrated in the previous literature, including works by Perkins and his colleagues (Perkins, 1985; Perkins et al., 1991), highlighting that the tendency is prevalent among students across various educational levels. The presence of *myside bias* in undergraduate Myanmar EFL learners suggests a need for argumentative writing instruction to develop students' ability to think from diverse perspectives and prevent the formation of a biased mindset in higher education. In the present study, students also self-evaluated their ability to use rebuttals at a low rate. Our study's findings encourage EFL instructors to adopt an approach to teaching argumentative writing with a social learning perspective (Vygotsky, 1978) in which students have chances to socialize argumentative discourse through a dialogic form of writing (Reznitskaya et al., 2007). Applying this approach with a particular focus on counter-argumentation, the study of Liu

and Stapleton (2020) could provide the possibility to start developing different perspectives, even at a young age, and bring positive benefits to students' argumentative writing.

Additionally, regarding argumentation fluency, the students in the debate group produced more counter-arguments that were equally better organized and more persuasive than their counterparts in the control group (Majidi et al., 2023). This positive impact of the debate can be attributed to EFL learners facing challenges in producing counter-arguments. In our study, considering carefully the results that some students were able to successfully counter-argue and compose rebuttals, although the percentage is low, it is possible to train students with effective argumentative writing instruction so that they can express their counterarguments and rebuttals appropriately and can come close to satisfactory performance.

Analyzing the essays quantitatively and qualitatively reveals that Myanmar EFL students need to improve the structure of argumentative writing and reasoning quality. To overcome the challenges of EFL learners, it is important to consider the dichotomy conceptual framework, namely *learn-to-argue* versus *argue-to-learn* (Hirvela, 2017). In the *learn-to-argue* perspective, the primary goal is to teach students the components of argumentation, including claims, evidence, counter-arguments, and rebuttals, and how to apply them in crafting well-constructed argumentative essays. EFL instructors adopting this *learn-to-argue* approach help learners grasp essential aspects of logic and how to use argumentative elements to build convincing arguments (Qin & Karabacak, 2010; Yang, 2022). The *arguing-to-learn* approach emphasizes developing critical thinking skills, rather than solely teaching argument structure. This perspective is often linked to activities like debating, where arguing is used to achieve goals like defending one's position and weakening opposing arguments. In this orientation, argument is viewed as a "process, not a product" (Hirvela, 2017, p. 72). The theoretical solution to overcome the EFL learners' challenges is to blend *learn-to-argue* and *arguing-to-learn* instructions. The positive impact is supported by the evidence of the recent studies in the EFL context (Zou et al., 2021; Wu & Chen, 2021). EFL teachers can initially pay more attention to teaching students how to argue persuasively and subsequently apply this knowledge and skill to enhance students' critical thinking through argumentation (e.g., Newell et al., 2015).

In light of the findings of the present study, a number of pedagogical implications were discussed below. Firstly, this study's findings indicate the plausibility of implementing dialogical argumentative activities such as classroom debates in the EFL context. Accordingly, textbook writers and curriculum developers are highly recommended to include these interactive tasks for teaching and learning argumentative writing in the engaging components of instructions. Secondly, as highlighted in this study, only the analysis of argumentative structures would not fully assess the argumentation; the reasoning quality should be considered in the argumentative writing rubric. Last but not least, educators are recommended to call for the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and prioritize the development of student's

critical thinking and applying argumentation as an inquiry tool beyond the structures of argumentative writing. The findings of this needs analysis could help EFL teachers figure out how to effectively prepare for argumentative writing instruction after exploring the difficulties Myanmar EFL learners encountered when writing an essay argumentatively.

In identifying students' needs, we acknowledge the value of multiple sources; however, because of the instructors' limited access, collecting information from the respective EFL teachers was impossible. More data collection from other universities in Myanmar is called for to capture more detailed and precise pictures of Myanmar EFL undergraduates' needs for composing argumentative writing. In terms of methodology, conducting follow-up interviews after the survey could yield valuable insights that were not captured through the questionnaires. It is advisable to utilize these additional sources and methods to triangulate the findings. Future studies need to investigate larger samples by systematically examining learner needs to produce more reliable findings.

This paper uses various sources to identify EFL learners' needs and challenges of argumentative writing and suggest improvements for EFL argumentative courses based on the findings. However, the real challenge lies in implementing the proposed changes after presenting the results to the targeted audience in the EFL context. It is crucial for EFL instructors to hold a strategic meeting for implementing the possible changes considering the local needs. This needs analysis can serve as a foundational step in encouraging the shift toward a more learner-centered approach by emphasizing the integration of dialogic pedagogy, blending learning-to-argue and arguing-to-learn instructions in the EFL context.

## CONCLUSION

This needs analysis attempted to examine Myanmar EFL undergraduates' purposes for learning argumentative writing, their perceptions along with the written performance toward the challenges in argumentative texts, and their preferences for future classes by analyzing their argumentative essays quantitatively and qualitatively. In light of the present study's findings, several pedagogical implications for EFL argumentative writing instruction can be drawn from the findings above. This study's findings indicate the students' voice to shift towards communicative and dialogic argumentative writing instruction in the EFL context. From students' perspectives, classroom debate, pair work, and group work were mostly favored, followed by the traditional teacher-centered approach. The results suggest the plausibility of the application of dialogic tasks, and EFL instructors could incorporate these tasks in their instructions for the profound impact on argumentative writing.

Most students admitted that they encountered challenges in applying counter-arguments and rebuttals while composing argumentative essays. The findings of this study call for reforming the conventional way of teaching argumentative writing, which is focused on form and structure and implementing meaningful dialogic activities in future

argumentative classes. Through dialogic pedagogy, EFL teachers can purposefully empower students to compose argumentative writing. Through the literacy practices of dialogic learning, there is an opportunity to improve EFL learners' critical thinking and argumentative writing. The study of Frijters et al. (2008) reported that dialogic pedagogy positively impacts students' critical thinking competence, enhancing their reasoning. Since the students in our study have audience awareness, which can lead to the foundation of critical thinking, the instructors should not hesitate to introduce critical thinking in argumentative writing classes and respond to Teo's (2019) call of teaching for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and dialogic pedagogy in EFL context. The results of our study imply that Myanmar EFL learners need to modify their perceptions of argumentative writing relating to critical thinking and the long-term goal of applying writing as a tool for in-depth learning. It is plausible to adopt the blending of learning-to-argue and arguing-to-learn instructions in the Myanmar EFL context since the learners hold a strong grasp of the importance of argumentative writing for their immediate needs and future careers. Finally, EFL instructors employing the blended approach need to raise students' awareness of the importance of applying argumentative writing not only as the essay product but also as the means for deeper life-long learning and high literacy.

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## APPENDIX A

### Consent Form

Dear Student:

Our research project aims to find out better ways of teaching and learning argumentative writing (writing to convince the reader about an opinion or standpoint) to EFL learners by investigating the students' perceptions, challenges, and preferences about argumentative writing. An important part of this needs analysis is understanding students' difficulties with composing argumentative essays, what skills students already possess and need to learn, and how students are eager to practice this writing. This questionnaire asks about your ideas and favors on teaching and learning argumentative writing in EFL classes. Since there are no "right" or "good" responses, your honest answers will help us better understand how Myanmar EFL undergraduates think about learning argumentative writing and what background information and expectations the students have concerning this kind of writing.

This is not an evaluation, and we do appreciate your voluntary work, particularly the composing task of argumentative writing. We will assign a code number to your questionnaire to link with your writing samples. Your responses will be confidential, and we are not sharing them with your teachers. All data will be destroyed at the end of the project.

Signature -----

## APPENDIX B

### Questionnaire

#### General Background Information

Gender: -----

Age: -----

1. Have you ever learned about argumentative writing in the Myanmar language?

Yes  No

2. Have you ever learned about argumentative writing in the English language at high schools and universities?

Yes  No

3. Have you ever taken international tests such as TOEFL or IELTS?

Yes  No

4. Are you preparing to take international tests such as TOEFL or IELTS?

Yes  No

#### Section I. Perceptions on Argumentative Writing

On a scale of 1(Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), indicate how important you think argumentative writing is in the following aspects.

	Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neutral 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
a. Argumentative writing is important for my current studies.					
b. Argumentative writing is important for my future career.					
c. Argumentative writing is important for international tests such as TOEFL or IELTS.					
d. Argumentative writing is important for critical thinking skills.					
e. Argumentative writing is important for classroom debate skills.					

**Section II. Self-assessment on Argumentative Writing Elements**

On a scale of 1 (Very difficult) to 5 (Very easy), rate your ability in each of these aspects of argumentative writing.

Aspects of Argumentative Writing	Very difficult 1	Difficult 2	Neutral 3	Easy 4	Very easy 5
1. Writing clear standpoints or effective claims of argumentative writing (claims)					
2. Writing supportive evidence for the main claim or argument (data)					
3. Writing opposing statements of claims (counter-arguments)					
4. Writing supportive evidence against counterarguments (counter-argument data)					
5. Writing statements to respond to counterarguments (rebuttal claims)					
6. Writing supportive evidence against rebuttal claims (rebuttal data)					

**Section III. Preferred classroom literacy activities for the future argumentative writing class**

On a scale of 1 (very unhelpful) to 5 (very helpful), rate each teaching activity according to the degree of your preference.

	Very unhelpful 1	Unhelpful 2	Neutral 3	Helpful 4	Very helpful 5
1. Teacher-centered lecturing					
2. Individual					
3. Pair work					
4. Group work					
5. Classroom debate					

**Section IV. Open-ended Question**

**1. Please share your suggestions or comments about the future argumentative writing course.**

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