

# ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING DIFFICULTIES OF THAI ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS

Maleerat Ka-kan-dee

English Language Studies Section  
School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia

Sarjit Kaur

English Language Studies Section  
School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia

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## ABSTRACT

*In this study, think aloud protocols (TAs) were used as a tool for analysing argumentative writing difficulties encountered by 60 fourth year Thai EFL English major students. This method employs cognitive processes to study the difficulties in writing while students generate their writing. It employs an analysis method to obtain the most informative detail that would help teachers to understand their students' weaknesses. This valuable information can be used to help teachers develop their teaching activities to meet the needs of their students (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Leighton & Gierl; 2007). Knowledge about university students' difficulties with academic writing is not adequately descriptive to effectively diagnose the features of students' problems with writing nor give valuable feedback. There is a critical need to investigate the difficulties experienced by Thai EFL English major students when writing in argumentative essays. This study employed think aloud protocols to identify the difficulties faced by Thai EFL English major students when writing argumentative essays. Findings from the study reveal that students articulated the following difficulties: vocabulary, grammar structure, providing solid evidence, structure of writing argumentative essays, time constraints, organising ideas, fulfilling task demand, understanding the questions, L1 transfer and translating, and writing thesis statements. Based on these findings, this study put forward useful insights on Thai tertiary students' writing difficulties with a complete description of the writing problems faced by the learners in selected Thai public universities. The findings are also beneficial for EFL lecturers in Thailand to in that they provide valuable insights into the weaknesses in their learners' language variants that can be used to develop their teaching programmes and instructions to more effectively support students' argumentative writing development. Additionally, it can also be used as guidelines for students to improve their argumentative writing. The implications of this study also suggest that curriculum planners and material writers and designers can integrate components that focus on argumentative writing which use think aloud protocols to comprehend the difficulties students experience when they compose written compositions. Such stakeholders can then use appropriate methods to develop students' writing competence in the Thai EFL context.*

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Argumentative writing has been confirmed by researchers to be the hardest model in writing (Ferretti, Andrews-Weckerly & Lewis, 2007; Neff-van Aertselaer & Dafouz-Milne, 2008). This genre of writing is important for university students to express their own points of view in academically appropriate forms and strategies. Unfortunately, both ESL and EFL learners at the tertiary level often encounter difficulties in the use of complex syntactic patterns and appropriate elements in composing argumentative writing. Consequently, by means of the drawbacks in language teaching methods of the past, particularly in the argumentative writing skill, a number of research studies (Watcharakaweelip, 2001; Thepsiri and Pojanapunya, 2012) have sought to investigate and demonstrate how argumentative writing can be improved by using effective methods to gauge the weaknesses of Thai EFL students' writing ability. There is a need to know more about the specific problems students' encounter when composing academic arguments. Unfortunately, there is a lack of research on argumentative writing difficulties that have predominantly focused on the diagnostic assessment of writing. Hence, there is a critical need to investigate the effective practice in order to develop students' argumentative writing competence. However, the awareness of this knowledge has not been changed into effective practice for assessment and instruction of university students. Moreover, research studies on argumentative writing difficulties in Thailand are scarce resulting in a dearth of insights about the challenges that Thai EFL students face with academic writing tasks.

In relation to this, Flower and Hayes (1981a, p.368) state that “the best way to model the writing procedure is to study a writer in action”. Think aloud protocols have recently received the attention of several scholars and researchers who set out to identify the difficulties ESL and EFL learners encounter as they compose writing essays. Think-aloud protocols are helpful for lecturers to understand their students’ writing competence in order to achieve the target writing skill. However, Knoch (2011) suggests that think aloud protocols can be used to diagnose the difficulties when learners are composing their argumentative writing. Likewise, Llosa et al. (2011) articulate the idea that think aloud protocols are mainly to identify the difficulties ESL and EFL learners encounter as they write argumentative essays. They believe that most existing instruments for evaluation writing are not sufficient to identify the right nature of the students’ problems in producing writing. This is because such evaluations do not yield adequately specific data to be beneficial for the teaching objectives. Therefore, there is a need to employ think aloud protocols to identify the weaknesses (Anderson, 2007).

Despite the importance of think aloud protocols in argumentative writing, we believe that it has not received the attention it deserves in Thailand. This is reflected by the scarcity of research on argumentative writing. It is, however, expected that this study which aims to analyse the argumentative writing of EFL English majors using think-aloud protocols in selected public universities could shed some light on argumentative writing problems that Thai EFL learners encounter. In this regard, we aim to use Think aloud protocols (Ericson & Simon, 1993) to diagnose the difficulties faced by Thai EFL English majors in selected Thai public universities when they compose argumentative essays. Furthermore, the results of this study would put forward some recommendations and suggestions to enable university students in Thailand to improve their quality of argumentative writing.

## **2.0 REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **2.1 Teaching Writing in ESL/ EFL Contexts**

Teaching writing has always been a debatable issue in the area of Second and Foreign Language Instruction. Although, there are a number of strategies for writing instruction in English as a Second Language (ESL hereafter) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL hereafter) contexts, not many ESL/ EFL writing instructors have a clear insight on writing approaches. Therefore, much of teaching writing still concentrates on a traditional approach that is mainly concerned with knowledge about the structure of language, and writing development as the result of the imitation of input, in the form of texts provided by the teacher. ESL/EFL writing is a difficult, intricate and demanding process. This hardship and intricacy in ESL/EFL academic writing arises from the reality that writing comprises searching out a thesis, fostering support for the claim, formulating, modifying, and finally editing the thesis to ensure an effective, error free writing product. Additionally, ESL/EFL academic writing is one of the most crucial genres of language instruction. As claimed by Coffin. (2004, p.3), “students academic writing continue to be at the centre of teaching and learning in higher education, but it is often an invisible dimension of the curriculum; that is, the rules or conventions governing what counts as academic writing are often assumed to be part of ‘common sense’ knowledge students have, and are thus not explicitly taught within disciplinary course.” To provide an effective ESL/EFL academic writing instruction is the prime responsibility for lecturers, researchers, textbook writers and programme coordinators in the area of foreign language instruction, but producing a textbook for most ESL/EFL students is a difficult task because the writing process requires an extensive range of cognitive and linguistic approaches of which ESL/EFL students are largely incognizant of. Moreover, research about ESL/EFL writing has evolved dramatically over the last 40 years, specifically between the late 1980s and the early 1990s. As a result, writing has now shifted an interdisciplinary area of question. Generally, there are three main types of ESL/EFL writing strategies consisting of product approach (Silva, 1990; Brown, 2001), process approach (Silva, 1983) and genre-based approach (Hyland, 2003a; Hyland, 2003b).

### **2.2 The Difficulties of Writing Argumentative Essays**

Writing an argumentative essay is one of the most common types of assignments set in university. This genre of writing calls for students to argue for and against a convinced proposal. Most tertiary students (whether in L1, L2 and EFL) are unable to argue or propose a convincing thesis statement. Argumentation is a procedure to compose an argument by looking for actual evidence to back up the claim or a thesis statement. To write a good piece of argumentative writing is often difficult for EFL/ ESL students. Basically, writing an argument begins with taking a stance and giving evidence in order to convince the readers to execute the action or to accept the idea based on a controversy. Nippold and Ward-Lonergan (2010, p. 238) note that “argumentative writing is a challenging communication task that needs

sophisticated cognitive and linguistic abilities.” Likewise many research studies confirm that an argumentative writing essay is the most difficult genre for both ESL and EFL students. Most Thai EFL students are unable to produce good argumentative essays because of their lack of readiness for English argumentative writing and insufficient practice writing during classroom instruction.

As stated by Crowhurst (1991, p.314) arguing a case is particularly challenging, even though “it is important both for academic success and for general life purposes”. Knudson (1994, p.211) also asserts that, “argumentation is one of the genres which is essential for full participation in society”. This genre of writing is the most crucial in academic writing especially at the tertiary level. Students are supposed to argue for their stand point in order to convince the readers. However, most ESL/EFL students struggle with the various difficulties in writing argumentative essays. They are unable to write due to insufficient skills in argumentative writing.

### **2.3 Think-aloud Protocols**

Think-aloud protocols have been widely used in writing research (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Cumming, 1989; Flower & Hayes, 1981; Murphy & Roca de Larios, 2010). Flower and Hayes (1981) stated that this method employs cognitive processes to study the difficulties in writing while students generate their writing. Leighton and Gierl (2007, p.170) confirmed that think-aloud protocols are a favourable method for notifying the development of diagnostic assessments. Likewise, Li (2006) claimed that think-aloud protocols provide a detailed record of what a writer attends to when he or she is writing. Think-aloud protocols employ an analysis method to obtain the most informative detail that would help teachers to understand their students’ weaknesses. This extremely important information can be used to help teachers develop their teaching activities to meet the needs of their students.

Tenopir et al. (1991) assert the claim that it is believed that think-aloud protocols have several advantages. First, they are very easy to collect. After understanding the instructions, the participants perform as the requirement of the assignment and speak aloud what they are thinking simultaneously. Second, this method makes it feasible to examine the reactions, feelings, and problems that the participants experience during task performance. It would be difficult to observe these features using other means. Third, the protocol data give approval for researchers to observe the consecutive steps of the participant’s cognitive processes over a given time period. Crutcher (1994) and Ericsson & Simon (1993) also claim that gained data from concurrent think aloud protocol is better than gaining a general description at the end of a process.

Ericsson and Simon (1993) and Payne (1994) propose that this method offers crucial developments in the detail of the data collection. However, researchers such as Nielsen (1993) and Boren & Ramey (2000) argued that there are also several deficiencies to the protocol. First, task performance pace is slower than usual because the participants require time to transfer their thoughts into words during the experiment. Therefore, there is a chance that think-aloud protocols may affect the thinking process. When the participants transfer their thought into speech, it disrupts the main performance. Second, there are some conflicts between theories in think aloud protocols that need to be solved. Due to these limitations, Ericsson and Simon (1993) set up specific processes for administering think-aloud protocols, with the aim of decreasing the disruption of the participant’s cognitive processes.

## **3.0. METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Research Design**

We used think aloud protocol to identify the difficulties experienced by Thai EFL English major students when writing argumentative essays. Conducting Think aloud protocols consist of four stages: (1) warm up stage: training in thinking aloud and practicing it, (2) audio recording and writing session stage: A small cassette recorder is used to audio-tape the verbal think-aloud protocols generated by participants, (3) audio transcript stage: transcribe verbal think aloud protocols and (4) protocol analysis. These steps will help to identify and assess the weaknesses of Thai EFL English major students writing of argumentative essays.

### **3.2 Participants**

Data were collected from 60 fourth year English major students who were enrolled in the Advanced Composition Writing course from two selected public universities in Thailand for the academic year 2013/2014. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted to elicit information from all the 60 students who participated in Think-aloud protocols. In addition, quantitative data were collected by administering two sets of IELTS writing tests to the students whereby each student was required to write one argumentative essays between 250 - 265 words. The selection of the fourth year students was motivated by the fact that they had completed a Basic Composition Writing course which is their English language compulsory writing course in the university. Ethical considerations were adhered to in this study as students' names were not used for all data collection procedures and student consent letters were handed out to the students before they agreed to participate in the study.

### **3.3 Research Instruments**

#### **3.3.1 Think aloud protocols**

Think aloud protocols which aim to identify EFL students' argumentative writing difficulties. Conducting think aloud protocols consist of the following four stages: (1) warm up stage, (2) audio recording and writing session stage, (3) audio transcript stage, (4) protocol analysis stage. These steps help to assess the writing weaknesses of the students. This method employs a cognitive process to assess the weaknesses of EFL English major students when they write argumentative essays. Furthermore, constructivism is used in which learners create new knowledge from their previous experience to support a claim when writing argumentative essays. To conduct think aloud protocols, the researchers employed verbalization theory which relates to coding scheme in protocols analysis to assess the argumentative writing difficulties faced by EFL English major students. Investigating students' weaknesses in argumentative writing can help EFL lecturers to change the methods to enhance students' argumentative writing performance. The teaching strategies used by these Thai EFL lecturers will be valuable descriptions for enhancing argumentative writing. The findings of this study will provide a valuable description of argumentative writing difficulties and put forward recommendations of effective methods to enhance argumentative writing performance.

#### **3.3.2 Semi Structured Interview**

Semi-structured interviews are considered an effective qualitative method in collecting data from respondents as, it provides the interviewer an extent of control, flexibility, access and power over the interview.

The interview technique was selected as a research instrument in the present research to allow the researchers to investigate two EFL lecturers' perceptions and opinions about the difficulties in teaching argumentative essays. Semi structured interview was also conducted with 60 students who participated in think aloud protocols. The interview sessions comprised nine questions as follows:

Q1. What are the main problems you face when writing an argumentative essay?

Q2. What kinds of argument components are commonly used in your writing argumentative essay?

Q3. What is the main problem you faced when you did think aloud protocols?

Q4. How do you begin your argumentative writing essay?

Q5. What kinds of evidence do you commonly used in your argumentative essay?

Q6. Have you faced the problem of writing off-topic when you write an argumentative essay? Why?

Q7. Which area of the problems (grammar, the structure and component of writing argumentative essay or vocabulary) do you consider as the main problem when you write an argumentative essay? Why?

Q8. Do you think it is important to follow the writing process when writing an argumentative essay?

Q9. Do you have any recommendations for teaching strategies that would help you write argumentative essays more effectively?

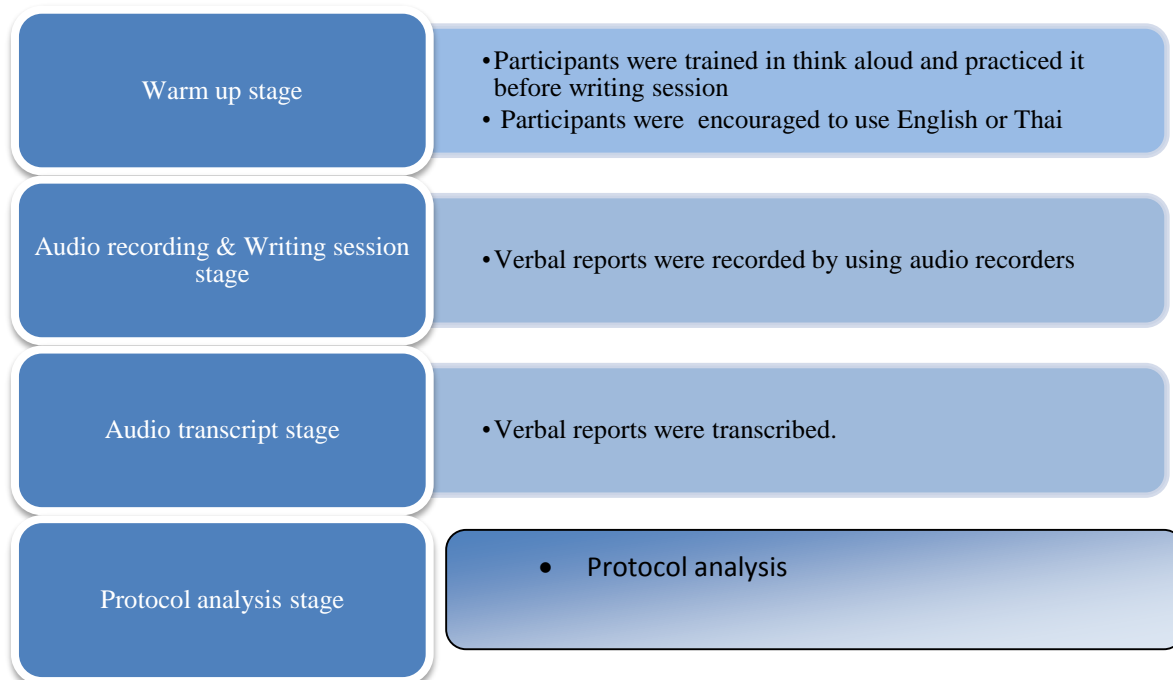
This interview was carried out immediately after students completed the think aloud protocols. To conduct the interview, 60 students were asked to articulate their perceptions based on the above questions. During the semi structured interview, students were encouraged to use English but they were also allowed to use Thai language to express their thoughts and ideas. In relation to this, all speech in Thai was translated into English by one of the researchers who are a bilingual speaker (fluent speaker of Thai and English) and great attention was taken to ensure that the meaning remained the same. The translations were then validated by another bilingual speaker (fluent in both Thai and English) who is also a writing lecturer at one of the public universities in Thailand.

### 3.4 Data Collection

Data were collected from the verbal reports produced by 60 EFL English major students while they wrote to answer to writing prompt:

- 1) "... Nowadays, more and more young unmarried adults are choosing to study and live outside their parents' homes. Do you think this trend is positive? As the world's economies have grown, alternative living arrangements among young people have become possible. This has led to the trend of young single people living apart from their parents" (IELTS, 2012).
- 2) "...Many people choose to work or live abroad because of the higher standards of living they can find outside their home country. Do you think this brings more advantages or disadvantages to the people who follow this path? Often in today's world, people are attracted to countries that can offer those increased opportunities and higher salaries" (IELTS, 2012).

These writing prompts were taken from a previous IELTS test. These two essay topics were considered as suitable controversial issues for the students to express their ideas to take stance for or against. The students were required to choose one topic and they are requested to carry out a concurrent think aloud task while writing an argumentative essay between 250 and 265 words on the topic. The students were given 50 minutes to complete this writing task and think aloud procedure simultaneously.



**Figure 1: Procedure of Think Aloud Protocols**

A concurrent verbal protocol or think-aloud was employed to record EFL participants' mental activity during the participants' performance. The procedures to collect the verbal report were classified into 4 stages: (1) warm up stage; (2) audio recording & writing stage; (3) audio transcript stage; (4) protocol analysis stage.

In ensuring the validity of think aloud protocols data, these were effective steps recommended by Ericson and Simon (1993) as well as Llosa et al. (2011) to employ a concurrent verbal protocol, or think aloud to record EFL English major students' mental activity in warm up stage.

- 1) The participants were settled comfortably.
- 2) Interference took place as little as possible.
- 3) An explanation was given about the aim of the research.
- 4) Participants were given an opportunity to practice thinking aloud
- 5) Interference took place only when the participants stopped talking.

However, some researchers (Stratman and Hamp-Lyons, 1994) have considered numerous problems with this approach such as the distraction of talking while writing is prone to misinterpret the think-aloud activity and give rise to individual differences in verbal reports. On the other hand, studies on the validity of concurrent think-aloud (Lighton & Gierl, 2007; Bowles, 2010) have found that asking students to think aloud while completing a task does not change their performance. In order to lessen the distraction of talking while writing, Ericson and Simon (1993) and Llosa et al. (2011) suggested several precautions to lessen the problems in using TAs which were followed in this study, such as (1) In order to increase EFL students' comfort with the method, the researchers provide EFL students with clear instructions and opportunity to practice the approach. In other words, the students were trained in thinking aloud and practiced it before writing sessions, (2) All procedures and training were pilot tested prior to the writing session, (3) the students were allowed to talk in Thai or English, (4) the students were prompted to keep talking if they fell silent for longer than 20 minutes. We took out the above suggestions given by Ericson and Simon (1993), and Llosa et al. (2011) to conduct think aloud protocols to gain a meaningful data.

After the warm up stage was completed, the audio recording stage was carried out. Small cassette recorders were distributed to participants in order to audio tape the verbal think aloud protocols produced by the participants. Students were encouraged to think aloud either in Thai or English on the actual language they were thinking. Once the data collection was completed, the researchers transcribed the think aloud protocols elicited during the writing session into Microsoft word files on a PC, i.e. after the writing session had been recorded, it was then transcribed. Transcribing a protocol usually means typing it out in verbatim as possible. However, typing out protocols is a tedious and time-consuming task. This stage may take about 10 times as much time to list and type the original protocol, depending on the clarity of the protocols and the language fluency of the participants.

Protocols that are transcribed from the audio recording are called raw protocols. After the transcribing session was completed, the researchers divided them into short segments or idea units for coding. In the phase of predicted coded protocols, the psychological model should imply predictions for the coded protocols. A coding scheme is an operationalisation of the psychological model that relates the psychological model to the text of the think aloud protocols. It is in the form of a coding scheme for protocol segments. Coded protocols can be obtained by applying the coding scheme to the protocols whereas the coding scheme is obtained by applying verbalisation theory to the psychological model. This research study employed verbalisation theory as well as the way in which thoughts occurred during writing's performance was verbalised. Verbalisation is a task that has been studied in psychology and theories about cognitive processes were applied in this study.

To identify the difficulties that students encountered while writing an argumentative essay, the researchers adapted an initial set of codes based on writing processes identified in previous research studies (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Llosa et al., 2011). The researchers employed inductive analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to identify additional categories. In the inductive analysis, two researchers coded the difficulties in NVivo10 and make queries for coding comparison. The researchers retained only the difficulties that have Kappa results above 0.70.

The transcriptions were then analyzed by the help of NVivo10, Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software. The repeated themes or the Kappa results less than 0.70 were deleted and merged together. While conducting think aloud protocols and semi structured interviews, students were encouraged to use English but they were allowed to use Thai language. Therefore, all verbal reports in Thai language in this study were translated into English by one of the researchers who is a bilingual speaker (fluent in both Thai and English) and a great care was taken to ensure the meaning remained the same. The translations were then validated by another bilingual speaker (fluent in both Thai and English) who is also a Thai EFL lecturer at a public university in Thailand. The participants' think aloud protocols and semi structured interviews were coded based on their universities: S for Student, U1 for MSU and U2 for UDRU (MSU refers to Mahasarakham University meanwhile UDRU refers to Udon Thanai Rajabhat University). For instance, a participant with a code of S1/ U1 refers to an EFL English major student from MSU.

### 3.5 Data Analysis

Creswell's (2011) models of data analysing and data coding were implemented in analysing the qualitative data in the present study. He recommended that analysis of qualitative data associates with six important steps which begins with analysing the audio-recorded data gathered from the semi structured interview with the students and Think aloud protocols. The audio recorded data were listened to, read completely and transcribed effectively. Merriam (1998, p. 160) asserts that the technique that is used in the inductive analysis is content analysis: a "process that involves the simultaneous coding of raw data and construction of categories that capture relevant characteristics of the documents content". The inductive data analysis begins with the detailed data to more general codes and more broad themes, which is employed to investigate argumentative writing difficulties experienced by Thai EFL English language lecturers and Thai EFL English major students.

Corbin and Strauss (1990) suggest systematic procedures in analysing qualitative data. The grounded theory procedure begins with open coding, followed by axial coding and selective coding. Coding is defined as "the process of segmenting and labelling text to form descriptions and broad themes in the data" (Creswell, 2011, p.243). During the coding process, the researchers analyzed the interview transcription for notable categories through analysis of every single word, phrase and sentence. Simultaneously, constant comparisons were generated through the analysis before choosing appropriate codes and categories for the data. After completing the coding and categorization process, the relationship between the categories or themes were investigated. This step is called as axial coding process (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

Regarding the above mentioned process, we employed NVivo10, Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS hereafter) to analyse the data after finishing the data transcription. Initially, the researcher created the project and imported the entire transcription document's file into the project. After that the analysing process began: (1) the researchers read the content in the document many times and underlined the theme, (2) the selected themes were coded into NVivo10, (3) one of the researcher asked her colleague (who was teaching in the writing field and known well how to code the theme in NVivo10) to code in the same project, (4) the researcher made query for coding comparison to check inter coder reliability. In this step, the researcher checked the agreement whether there was agreement or disagreement on each theme or not. If there was no agreement on that theme, the researchers rejected it to retain only the accepted Kappa results above 0.70. Kappa coefficient is used to measure a proportion of corresponding codes to indicate inter coder reliability.

$$K = (TA - \sum EF) \div (TU - \sum EF)$$

TA= total units of agreement between two users

$\sum EF$  = the expected frequency of agreement occurring by chance

TU = total unit within the sources

The result of Kappa above 0.70 was accepted to have an inter coder reliability. Many researchers consider the Kappa coefficient as a more beneficial measure of inter coder reliability than the percentage agreement value.

## 4.0 FINDINGS

### 4.1 Difficulties encountered by students while writing

Table 1 below displays the frequencies of argumentative writing difficulties articulated by the 60 Thai EFL English major students:

**Table 1: Frequencies of argumentative writing difficulties faced by students**

Difficulties faced by students	Number	and	Percentage
Evaluating	3		5.0%
fulfilling task demand	23		38.3%
grammar structure	40		66.7%
Interpreting the question	6		10.0%
L1 transfer and translating	13		21.7%
Length	2		3.3%
organized ideas	24		40.0%

Pacing	5	8.3%
solid evidence	32	53.3%
<hr/>		
Difficulties faced by students	Number	and Percentage
The structure of argumentative writing	33	55.0%
topic choice	2	3.3%
understanding the question	17	28.3%
Vocabulary	42	70.0%

During the think aloud protocols, the students talked about the difficulties in writing argumentative essay. As shown in Table 1, 42 students (70.0%) indicated that they faced great difficulties in vocabulary. One student said that

*“But my problem at this moment is that I cannot think of vocabulary that I need to use because this is writing prompt so I am not allowed to use a dictionary”.* (S1/U2).

This student seems to have insufficient on vocabulary because she cannot think of the needed vocabulary item as she always relies on the dictionary to find the needed vocabulary for her writing. Unfortunately, in this writing prompt she was not allowed to use the dictionary.

About 40 students (66.7%) reported that grammar structure in English was one of the great difficulties for their argumentative writing. They felt that they did not have enough knowledge of the grammatical structure. For example, during the think aloud protocol, one of the Thai EFL English major students articulated that

*“The problem that found is the problem of language in writing since I am weak in grammar very much so it is the obstruction of expressing opinion in writing”.* (S46/U1)

Understanding the argumentative writing structure was also considered difficult for Thai EFL English major students because 33 students (55.0%) students pointed out that the structure of argumentative writing posed the main barrier for them to produce a good piece of argumentative essay. For example, during the think aloud protocol, one of the students stated that

*“The problem that I encounter is that I do not have the pattern in writing essays to argue or convince the readers to believe in what I write. In this regard I am not familiar with writing argumentative”.* (S21/U2)

In relation to the difficulties of solid evidence, 32 students (53.0%) stated that providing solid evidence was one of the most difficult aspects for them to convince the audience to believe in what they wrote. For example, during the think aloud protocol one of the students stated that

*“Typically, I will use the intuition and belief to answer experiences that have been heard are used to write the evidence in order to support in the part of the Thesis statement so that the given reasons to write for argument are not believable”.* (S42/U1)

With reference to the difficulties of time constraints in argumentative writing, 29 students (48.3%) faced the difficulties in this aspect. One of students stated during the think aloud protocol:

*“Another problem is the limitation of the time. I cannot write a good piece of writing because I feel hectic. I need more time to write because of the limited time I cannot think of strong evidence to write”.* (S7/U2)

While the difficulties of organizing ideas were considered difficult for 40% of students as well, they admitted that it was difficult to write a well-organized argumentative essay. For example, during the think aloud protocol, the following students pointed out that



*“I don't know how to organize the idea of argumentative writing essay. I do not know that I have to write the Introduction or I have to control the idea. I have to write supporting detail 1,2,3 and then I have to write the conclusion. I write down what I can think of without controlling the idea”.* (S12/U2)

With the reference to the difficulties of fulfilling task demand and understanding the questions, 23 students (38.3%) considered this task demand difficult. One of the students' statement during the think aloud protocol stated that

*“I don't have a standpoint in taking stance and giving the reasons that can support. This problem caused by the thinking system when I cannot think, I cannot write. I don't know how to project voice in the manner of controlling idea and followed by backing up the information”.* (S13/U2)

Meanwhile 17 students (28.3%) stated that they encountered the difficulties of understanding the question as evidenced in the excerpt below:

*“The questions are very long so I need to interpret the questions first. I have to read both questions that use long time to make understanding the topic. The topic that I choose is the second topic. I interpret the question in order to make understanding it”.* (S2/U2)

The difficulties of L1 transfer and translating and thesis statement were also considered difficult for 21.7% of the students. They felt that it was difficult for them to write in English because they were familiar with translating from Thai structure into English structure. For example one of them articulated during think aloud protocol that:

*“I have the problem in writing that I have to think in Thai and then translate into English when I have to write in English I cannot think how to write in English and I am going to write based on the Thai structure which it is not convey the right meaning”.* (S4/U2)

Likewise 13 students (21.7%) stated that writing the thesis statement was difficult for them to write in order to convince the audience as stated by the student below:

*“ The problem that I found is how to write a thesis statement that can heed the readers to believe in the matter that I write and find the believable evidences to support the thesis statement”.* (S47/U1)

Other difficulties experienced by at least a quarter of the students included interpreting the questions (10.0%), pacing ( 8.3%), evaluating ( 5.0%), topic choice (3.3%) and length (3.3%) respectively are evidenced in the excerpts below:

*“The problem in writing essay at this moment is that I cannot interpret the question because I do not know the vocabulary, so it makes me have difficulty in writing”.* (S16/U2)

*“The last problem is that I am a person who thinks and writes very slow. So I cannot write in time”.* (S25/U1)

*“Another thing is that I am not sure whether I interpret the question correctly or not”.* (S25/U1)

*“The problem that I found is that the provided topics are not interesting so I cannot think of the plot to write and I write without interested Introduction that can convince the readers to read what I have written”.* (S28/U2)

*“I cannot write 250 words in this essay”.*(S2/U2)

#### 4.2 Results of the Students' Interview after the Think Aloud Protocols

Table 2 below reports on the frequency of difficulties (gathered from the interview session) experienced by the students:

**Table 2: Frequencies of difficulties faced by students**

Difficulties	Number and Percentage
Evaluating	1 ( 1.7%)
fulfilling task demand	2 (3.3%)
Grammar structure	9 ( 15.0%)
Interpreting questions	8 (13.3%)
L1 transfer and interpreting	1 (1.7%)
Solid evidence	12 (20.0%)
The structure of argumentative writing	4 ( 6.7%)
Thesis statement	5 ( 8.3%)
Time constraint	2 ( 3.3%)
Understanding the question	1 ( 1.7%)
Vocabulary	15 (25.0%)

The majority of Thai EFL English major students had great difficulties in vocabulary because 15 (25.0%) encountered this difficulty when writing argumentative essays. A total of 12 students (20.0%) claimed that they had difficulties in putting together organized ideas and providing solid evidence to produce a well organized argumentative essay. Moreover, difficulties in grammar structure were considered great difficulties because 9 students (15.0%) claimed that mastering and understanding the grammar structure was a barrier for them. The results from this interview sessions with the students were quite similar to the Think Aloud Protocols in that the students experienced the great difficulties in the following domains: vocabulary, grammar structure, organised ideas and solid evidence.

All the respondents (60 EFL English major students) were asked to talk about the argument components that they are commonly used when writing argumentative essays. Majority of students told the researchers that they mainly used thesis statement (claim) and evidence (data) in their writing. They stated:

*"The argument components that I use are Thesis statement (claim) and evidence". (S1/ U2)*

*" I use Thesis statement (claim) and evidence in my writing." (S41/U1)*

In relation to the results, it was clearly seen the students did not use the other argument components such as counterargument claim, counterargument data, rebuttal claim and rebuttal data which were considered essential elements in putting forward a solid argument.

With the reference to the problems faced by students in the think aloud protocols, majority of the students did not like to talk out loud and write simultaneously. One of them stated that:

*"It makes my thinking interrupted and makes my brain paradoxical. I do not like writing and speaking out as well". (S21/U1)*

They also told the researchers that they had difficulties on L1 transfer and translation in the process of think aloud protocols. They had to translate from Thai to English when writing the essay. The excerpts below highlight this issue:

*"I have the problem of L1 transfer. While I am writing English, I have to stop thinking and speaking because doing three things at the same time it makes me confused".(S19/U1)*

*"My thinking is confused that I have to think, speak and write simultaneously. The process of thinking*

*and speaking are in Thai but when I write I have to write in English. Therefore, when I write in English the process of thinking and speaking interrupted. It is unnatural". (S 53/U2)*

The researchers asked the students to talk about the way to begin their argumentative essays. Most of the students stated that they used the classic five paragraphs to write, as shown in the excerpt below:

*"I begin by writing the Introduction and Thesis statement after that I write the body of three paragraphs and find out for the reasons to support the Thesis statement. Finally, I write the conclusion. I have to think of the evidence from internet journal to support what I have written in order to convince the readers believe in what I wrote". (S24/ U2)*

On the other hand, there were two students who begin their writing by dividing it into three phases. They stated:

*"I have to find the comparison of both sides and find the inspiration taken from opinions is mainly on our opinion which divided in to three phases, the first phase is opinion that is facts that make the readers believe in our writing. The second phase is recommendation of the information that used to support more which are positive information. The third phase is the part that use citation of course if we write without citation the readers do not believe at all if we have research or journal articles that have written in journals, interview that have been broadcast on Television will be supported our writing". (S22/ U1)*

The respondents were asked to talk about the type of evidence they used in their writing. Table 4.3 below illustrates the different types of evidence used in students' writing:

**Table 3: Different types of evidence used by Thai EFL English major students**

Different types of evidence (data)	Number and Percentage
Experiences	8 (13.3%)
Facts	24 (40.0 %)
Personal opinion	52 (86.7%)
Research report	2 (3.3%)
Statistics	2 (3.3%)

As shown in Table 3, 52 (86.7%) students stated that they used personal opinions to support the argument and 24 students (40.0%) used facts to back up their claims. They claimed that:

*"The evidence that used is personal opinions" (S56/U1).*  
*"The evidence that used is facts and personal opinions" (S5/U1)*

The results indicate that Thai EFL English major students are unable to use other types of evidence such as research report or statistics to back up the thesis statement in order to make the argument more solid. Only 2 students (3.33%) were able to use research report and statistics.

The respondents were asked about the essence to follow the process of writing, majority of students told the researchers that it is very important to follow the process of writing argumentative essays. The excerpt below illustrated the issue:

*"It is very necessary to follow the process of writing argumentative essays because it will help me write more easily" (S1/U1)*

Based on the results, it indicated that students concern about the importance of writing process of argumentative essay that facilitated them to produce a well organized essay.

Another question, the respondents were asked to talk about writing off topic, 33 students (55.0%) admitted that they used to write off topic. They stated that:

“I used to write out off topic because I interpret the question incorrect” (S3/U1).

On the other hand, 27 students (45.0%) confirmed that they never write off topic as stated in the excerpt below:

“I never write out off topic because the question has explained the background already” (S10/U1).

Table 4.4 below shows the range of students’ expectations from their EFL lecturers in writing course:

**Table 4: Students’ Expectation from EFL Writing Lecturers**

Students’ expectation from lecturers	Number and Percentage
assign homework to practice	4 (6.7%)
build up the atmosphere of joyful learning	2 ( 3.3%)
discussion how to write the argument	2 ( 3.3%)
give feedback time to time	5 (8.3%)
Practice make progress	17 ( 28.3%)
Provide different media	3 (5.0%)
Provide the model in writing	22 (36.7%)
Reading articles and grammar from time to time	5 ( 8.3%)
Teach academic vocabulary and example for usage	12 (20.0%)
Teach based on the process	4 ( 6.7%)
Teach citation	2 (3.3%)
Teach sentence structure	8 (13.3%)
Teach techniques in writing	7 (11.7%)
Teach argumentative writing step by step	9(15.0%)

As shown in the table above, 22 students (36.7%) called for providing the model in writing. One of them stated:

*“I need the teacher to give clear examples of writing and provide me with the interested topics. She must use media that is better than this” (S48/U1).*

A total of 17 students (28.3%) claimed that they need to practice more writing as “Practice makes progress”. They stated that they need a lot of assignments and feedback from their lecturers from time to time as well. One of the students stated:

*“Students have to practice by themselves as “Practice make progress” and ask the teacher gives the feedback”( S4/U2).*

As many as 12 students (20.0 %) need their lecturer to teach them academic vocabulary and provide examples of usage while 9 students (15.0 %) expect their lecturer to teach argumentative writing structure step by step as evidenced in the following student excerpts:

*“I need the teacher to teach us the academic vocabulary together with gives an example of usage ( S2/U2)*

*“I want the teacher to teach us to write argumentative essay step by step and provides the model in writing. This will make students to write easily” ( S1/U2).*

Based on these results, it is clear that many students are still unable to use academic vocabulary effectively in their writing as well as they are not familiar with the structure of argumentative writing. In addition, 8 students (13.3%) required lecturers to teach sentence structure. It can be implied that these students are not competent in sentence structure.

## 5.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING

The aim of this study was to identify the argumentative writing difficulties that students encountered when they compose argumentative essays in selected Thai public universities. It was noted that researchers, educators and policymakers have realised that there is a critical need to accord greater attention to the improvement of writing teaching for tertiary students. The way to improve writing instruction is to develop insights into the diagnostic evaluation of writing. This type of evaluation provides valuable data about students' weaknesses in argumentative writing. Moreover, it is beneficial for EFL lecturers in selected public universities in Thailand to gain further insights into the weaknesses of their learners' language variants that can be used to develop their teaching programmes and instructions to more effectively support students' argumentative writing development.

Additionally, it can also be used as guidelines for students to improve their argumentative writing. The findings of this study can also provide useful suggestions to curriculum planners and material writers and designers to integrate components that focus on argumentative writing which use think aloud protocols to comprehend the range of difficulties students experience when they compose written compositions. Such stakeholders can then use appropriate methods to develop students' writing competence in the Thai EFL context.

### 5.1 ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING DIFFICULTIES

The goal of this study was to examine the difficulties that Thai EFL English major students experienced when writing an argumentative essays. The findings of the study revealed that the main difficulties faced by Thai EFL English major students were vocabulary, grammar structure, structure of argumentative writing, providing solid evidence, time constraints, organized idea, fulfilling task demand, understanding the questions, L1 transfer and translating, writing the thesis statement, interpreting the questions, pacing, evaluating, topic choice and length. Vocabulary and grammar structure has been regarded the main barrier in writing argumentative essays in Thai context. This result was different from a study conducted by Llosa et al. (2011) whereby they found that the main difficulties for New York City students were translating and generating ideas. It has to be pointed out that Thai EFL English major students are incompetent in the knowledge on vocabulary and grammar structure. In addition, the students experienced various difficulties ranging from finding solid evidence to support the thesis statement to how to write a good thesis statement to convince readers. These difficulties were prominent barriers in writing argumentative essays in the Thai context. The results of this study were similar to the study carried out by Lertpreedakorn (2009) and Promwinai (2010) whereby they stated that Thai EFL students are incompetent in areas ranging from grammar structure to putting together organised ideas. Similarly, Bennui (2008) reported that most Thai EFL tertiary learners are incompetent in their argumentative writing skill because of their lack of preparation of English argumentative writing and this resulted in inadequate performance in their classroom practice. Future research should examine the relationship between different types of writing performance among students and the types of writing difficulties articulated during think aloud protocols.

The description and perspective of the difficulties drawn out by the think aloud protocol advocates that this research approach can be utilized feasibly as a diagnostic tool to gain valuable insights into students' weaknesses. The verbal reports supported understanding about the difficulties that Thai EFL English major students encountered with argumentative writing. In addition, the verbal reports highlighted weaknesses in students' ability about argumentation in the form of verbalized difficulties. With the reference to what was revealed by the students' think aloud protocols, this diagnostic tool has the potential to give lecturers with useful information on how to make interpretations about their students' ability in argumentative writing. The think aloud protocol produced detailed data about how Thai EFL English major students discussed their difficulties while writing.

Findings from the semi structured interview were also beneficial to lecturers to help improve their writing instruction. Majority of Thai EFL English major students were unable to use strong evidences to support the thesis

statement. They only used personal opinions and facts which are often not considered as solid evidence. This finding is similar to the study conducted by Brem and Rip (2000). Writing lecturers have to focus on different types of evidence used to make solid evidence to back up the supporting details in their instructions. Thai EFL English major students need to be encouraged to study and analyse the sample texts in order to see how good writers use evidence to support their writing.

In addition, the findings of this study reveal that Thai EFL English major students need their lecturers to provide a model of writing so they can follow the model to practice e writing good argumentative essays. The students want their EFL lecturers to teach them good sentence construction as well as provide step by step instruction on how to structure argumentative essays. Furthermore they need their lecturers to teach them academic vocabulary and show examples of usage in writing. The students feel that these strategies can help them improve their writing competence. More research needs to be carried out to explore what lecturers want to know about writing and about evaluation in order to employ diagnostic evaluation to identify the sources of students' difficulties with writing as well as their teaching methods. In addition, it is critical to explore the effective teaching strategies to help improve Thai EFL English major students' argumentative writing skill. This study also provides useful suggestions to policymakers and lecturers engaged in rigorous instruction and providing useful feedback. The types of teaching strategies that can help improve students' writing skill should also be an area of attention for further research.

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

The aim of this research study was to identify the difficulties that Thai EFL English major students encounter when writing argumentative writing using think aloud protocols. The findings showed that providing detailed information about students' weaknesses in their writing activity can raise awareness among EFL teachers and students. This diagnostic approach (think aloud protocol) can also be combined with other appropriate teaching approaches toward making significant contributions in having a detailed profile of students' weaknesses in writing argumentative essays. Such information would be beneficial for EFL lecturers to design and improve their writing programmes and teach effectively to further support students' writing improvement.

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