A Study about EFL English- Major Students' Challenges in
Writing Argumentative Essays at Soc Trang Teachers' Training College, Vietnam

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Abstract

This study primarily aimed to identify difficulties in the English argumentative essay writing encountered by Vietnamese EFL English-major students. The study was conducted with 21 EFL English major students at Soc Trang Teachers' Training College, Vietnam. To find out the challenges students faced when writing argumentative essays, a questionnaire with 29 items was designed based on the Likert scale to collect data from students. In addition, six participants were then asked to sit for the intensive interview to gain more in-depth difficulties in writing argumentative essays and the learning strategies they used to help improve their writing skill themselves. Qualitative data were analyzed through grounded theory, in which the data were transcribed and coded thematically. The findings from the students' questionnaire and interviews revealed that they faced the following specific writing difficulties; unfamiliarity with argumentative rhetorical features, insufficient knowledge about grammar rule, insufficient academic vocabulary, difficulty in writing a clear thesis statement, and inability to provide solid evidence, to generate well organized ideas, and to write valid conclusions. The results also showed that most of the investigated students had difficulties in writing argumentative essays. Besides, they offered some ways to promote writing effectively. It is important to note that this issue demands a new and effective teaching essay writing strategy to achieve successful outcomes of teaching and learning process especially in essay writing context.

Keywords: *Argumentative essays, challenges, EFL English -major students, Soc Trang Teachers' Training College*

1. Introduction

Gupta (1998) indicates "writing has been claimed to be a tough skill to acquire and is dreaded by L2 students.". Argumentative writing has been confirmed by researchers to be the hardest model in writing (Ferretti et al., 2007; Neff-van Aertselaer & Dafouz-Milne, 2008). In his book published in 2010, Morley confirms "writing is not an ability we acquire naturally, even in our first language – it has to be taught" (p.3). Also, Capucho and Oliveira (2005) and Al-Khasawneh (2010) stated that international students were dealing with problems in writing academic essays.

At Soc Trang Teachers' Training College, Vietnam, English-major students frequently makeerrors when doing writing tasks such as postcards, letters, emails, journals, stories, or paragraphs. There are different kinds of mistakes in grammar, vocabulary, organization, cohesive devices, styles, and others. The main reason for this drawback is the low-level students who lack English competence and the ability of acquisition. Most students find it hard to understand and memorize the lessons.

1.1. Writing

Brown (2001) claimed that writing was a thinking process. He also stated that one could plan the concept of writing and give it an unlimited number of revisions before publishing. Furthermore, in high-level education, students were required to draw on particular work and adopt the patterns and genres of academic discourse in their writing tasks (Tardy, 2010). He added that academic writing often required scholars to construct an idea from the expert point of view even though they were not considered as the expert of the topic Dyson and Freedman (as cited in Sharp, 2016) stated that writing is considered to be the process of development. In another word, writing is conveying information or expression of original ideas

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in a consecutive way in the new language. Consequently, the requirement of English writing ability would become one of the essential criteria for a qualified person in the new century.

Writing is the representation of language that uses a set of symbols. It is different from illustration, such as cave drawing and painting. Writing began as a reliable means for transmitting information, maintaining financial accounts, keeping historical records, and similar activities. In both ancient Egypt and Mesoamerica, writing may have evolved through the development of calendars, astronomical records, and a political necessity for recording historical and environmental events. The oldest known use of writing in China was in divination in the royal court (Bancha 2013).

1.2. Academic writing

Oshima & Hogue (2017, p. 3) stated that academic writing was the kind of writing used in high school and college classes. Academic writing was different from creative writing, which was the kind of writing used in writing stories. It is also different from personal writing, which is the kind of when people write letters or e-mails to their friends and family. Creative writing and personal writing are informal so that slang, abbreviations, and incomplete sentences can be used. However, academic writing is formal; it is not recommended to use slang or contractions. Also, writing complete sentences and organizing them in a certain way are also suggested. Academic writing in English is probably different from academic writing in your native language. The words, grammar, and the way of organizing ideas are probably different from what most are familiar with. In fact, the English way of writing may seem clumsy, repetitive, and even impolite to the writer. Keep in mind that it is neither better nor worse than other ways; it is just different.

Success at an advanced level of education, such as college or university, requires developed communicative skills known as academic literacies. It also "involves adapting new ways of knowing: new ways of understanding, interpreting and organizing knowledge" (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 158). One of these skills is Academic writing. Tarnopolsky and Kozhushko (2007) explained academic writing as "the most creative type of writing that can be taught to students of English as a foreign or second language" (para. 4), and have also accounted for it as "a unique means for learners' consciously mastering the creative, productive, and expressive approach towards communicative performance in the target language" (para. 5). Academic writing is highly required for university courses (Whitaker, 2009). Academic writing is, therefore, a tool for success at higher educational levels if mastered perfectly by students. It will result in a high sense of research skills, information analysis and other skills such as arguing, organizing and expressing personal views (Whitaker, 2009). Irvin (2010) considers academic writing as "...a form of evaluation that asks you to demonstrate knowledge and show proficiency with certain disciplinary skills of thinking, interpreting, and presenting" (p. 8).

1.3. Academic essays

An academic essay can be seen as a document that has a defined structure – an introduction, a body and a conclusion.

1.3.1. Types of academic essays

Most essays are written in an academic setting fall into one of four categories, or modes: exposition, narration, description, and persuasion. There are variations (or subcategories) of different essays that are written in each primary mode, but each variation ultimately has the same overall purpose:

Exposition: an essay that attempts to inform the reader about something important or explain something to him/her (a process, a set of rules, the benefits of an activity, and others). Common expository writings: business or technical writing, process writing, compare and/or contrast essays, reaction essays, response essays, and often research-based essays.

Narration: writing that tells the reader about a particular event(s) that took place. Common narration writings: personal essays, short stories, novels, and poetry.

Description: writing that uses vivid language to describe a person, place, or event so that the reader can picture the topic clearly in his/her mind. Fiction and poetry often use large amounts of descriptive writing, and sometimes only attempt to serve this descriptive purpose.

Persuasion/Argumentation: writing that takes a stand on a principle (frequently a controversial issue) and attempts to persuade the reader to adopt a similar mindset. At the collegiate level, persuasive writing assignments are quite common. The most common persuasive essay is the argument paper. The reason for this is because writing an argument essay involves incorporating critical thinking and often the use of outside sources. Many papers written in disciplines other than English are a variation of the argument paper and should be treated similarly (ex-an analysis essay for literature that defends a particular form of literary criticism for the literary work).

1.3.2. Argumentative essays

Irin (2010) defined an argumentative essay was an essay in which the writer either agreed or disagreed with an issue with uses of reasons to support their opinion. The goal of this essay is to convince the readers that the writer's opinion is right. Argumentation is a popular kind of essay question because it forces students to think on their own: They have to take a stand on an issue, support their stand with solid reasons, and support their reasons with solid evidence. What is unique about an argumentative essay is that the writer could not just give reasons to support their point of view; they must also discuss the other side's reasons and then rebut them (*Rebut* means to point out problems with the other side's reasons to prove that they are not valid arguments). The reason is to convince the readers that the writer has thoroughly considered all sides of the issue. When the writer shows that they are reasonable and open-minded, the readers are more likely to listen to their point of view.

Writing an argumentative essay is one of the most common types of assignments set in college. This type of writing calls for students to argue for and against a convincing proposal. Most tertiary EFL students 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 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 controversy. Nippold and Ward-Lonergan (2010, p. 238) note that "argumentative writing is a challenging communication task that needs sophisticated cognitive and linguistic abilities." Similarly, many research studies confirm that an argumentative writing essay is the most difficult type for both EFL students. Most 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 standpoint in order to convince the readers. However, most EFL students struggle with the various difficulties in writing argumentative essays. They are unable to write due to insufficient skills in argumentative writing.

The argumentative essay is a genre of writing that requires the student to investigate a topic; collect, generate, and evaluate evidence; and establish a position on the topic concisely. Argumentative essay assignments generally call for extensive research of literature or previously published material. Argumentative assignments may also require empirical research where the student collects data through interviews, surveys, observations, or experiments. Detailed research allows the student to learn about the topic and to understand different points of view regarding the topic so that she/he may choose a position and support it with the evidence collected during research. Regardless of the amount or type of research involved, argumentative essays must establish a clear thesis and follow sound reasoning.

The structure of the argumentative essay is held together by (1) a clear, concise, and defined thesis statement that occurs in the first paragraph of the essay, (2) clear and logical transitions between the introduction, body, and conclusion, (3) body paragraphs that include evidential support, (4) evidential

support (whether factual, logical, statistical, or anecdotal), and (5) a conclusion that does not simply restate the thesis but readdresses it in light of the evidence provided.

1.4. Problems on EFL students in writing argumentative essays

Younes and Albalawi (2015) pointed out that writing needs huge effort as well as practicing it in terms of paragraph organization, language use, and mechanics, for the reason that those three aspects are potential in influencing the writing performance such as content and vocabulary including elements of how to formulate ideas, develop and analyze them before displaying the essay writing as a final draft. Also, essay writing provides students opportunities to build and develop critical thinking, so that students are trained to make their judgement, decide their writing styles, and pick out scientific diction for their academic writing task (Bakry & Alsamadani, 2015)

The writing difficulties may be related to features like grammar, syntax, cohesion or others, and students usually vary in facing these difficulties. Furthermore, students' writing difficulties may be a result of different factors, because "...not only self-strategies influence students' performance but also the effectiveness of the methods and techniques that teachers apply in their English composition courses" (Aragón, Baires & Rodriguez, 2013, p.1). Significant to the nature of writing as a cognitive process, and the amount of time and effort it requires, Aragón, Baires and Rodriguez (2013) argued that students who have low interest in writing and learning to write mostly have low writing proficiency. Another research which confirmed writing difficulties was conducted by Salem (as cited in Huwari & Al-Khasawneh, 2013), in which he concluded that ESLs and EFLs encounter the difficulties impeding them to write effectively.

"Grammar" was defined by Neuleib (as cited in Hartwell, 1985) as "the internalized system that native speakers of a language share" (p. 205). A more detailed definition was proposed by Harmer (2001) as "the description of how words can change their forms and can be combined into sentences in that language" (p. 12). These ways are called 'the grammar rules' that are basic elements in every language and are also inseparable from writing (Hartwell, 1985). Grammar rules mainly include various rules such as tenses, prepositions, word class, voice and many others. These rules stand as a problem for many students in writing. In investigating the effect of teaching grammar, Hartwell (1985) cited different studies which concluded that formal grammar instruction made no improvement on students writing ability nor on their ability to avoid errors (Neuleib, 1977; Elley, Barham, Lamb & Wyllie 1979). The main writing difficulties students find regarding grammar is the low understanding of it, which results later on in difficulties in arranging proper writing (Bahri & Sugeng, 2010).

"Vocabulary" is an important aspect of language skills as suggested by Nation (as cited in Mehring, 2005). Vocabulary is defined by the Cambridge dictionary as "all the words known and used by a person". Vocabulary related difficulties are generally; the students fail to recall important words to use and fail to use the appropriate words and poor vocabulary. More importantly, knowing words generally means knowing their meanings, basic forms (Shejbalova, 2006) and their distribution (Lado, 1955), which often results in a confusing for students on different occasions. Nakata (as cited in Mehring, 2005) noted that vocabulary acquisition is an ongoing process that requires students' constant repetition and use of words to be effectively attained in the long term memory and then retrieved once needed. Developing vocabulary through memorizing words of a list is not sufficient, for students to acquire vocabulary they need to learn words as a part of the context in which they occur.

"Spelling and punctuation" are two commonly shared writing difficulties among students. Learning to spell words correctly is expected to take place in the earliest stages of language teaching, yet it is not always the case for spelling may become difficult in some instances. Moreover, spelling is said to be closely interrelated with reading; Frith (1980) argues that "Learning to read should imply learning to spell, and learning to spell should imply learning to read" (p. 496). However, this is not always the case, for there exist people with excellent reading abilities, but struggle when it comes to spelling words (Frith, 1980, p. 497). Writing difficulties of relevance to spelling mainly include the misspelling of words which are a result of the irregularities of the English spelling system (Bancha, 2013). It is related to the similarities of vowels, for instance, that can be decoded in different spelling. Additionally, Bancha further explained that spelling

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mistakes may occur when students are less concentrated due to tiredness or carelessness about the correctness of words (p. 4).

"Errors and mistakes" are part of students' writing as they progress in learning to write. Hadler (as cited in Bahri & Sugeng, 2010) argued that "Errors give the writer evidence of difficulty which students have a problem in practicing writing, although they do not provide them with all the possible evidence, nor are they to be taken as the only proof" (p. 3). Considering errors as a proof that students face difficulties during writing, the emergence of error analysis (EA) was first established in the 1970s by Corder "as a type of linguistic study that focuses on the errors learners make" (Sawalmeh, 2013, p. 2). According to Corder (as cited in Sawalmeh, 2013), EA is of two main objectives. The first is to understand learners as they learn in a second language (L2), while the second is to enable effective learning by using learners' knowledge of his native language (L1).

To conclude, error analysis is one way by which teachers can measure the students' difficulties in writing and build on them a particular remedy to improve their writing instruction in the future. More importantly, "...errors are advantageous for both learners and teacher" (Sawalmeh, 2013), for it offers clear insights of the areas of difficulties not only related to students but also connected with teachers.

Writing essays is the most important competence in the students' college writing courses in Soc Trang Teachers' Training College. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the challenges students facing when writing academic essays in general, especially argumentative essays in particular.

1.5. Related studies

Coffin. (2004, p.3) claimed that "students' academic writing continues to be at the center of teaching and learning in higher education, but it was often an invisible dimension of the curriculum; that was, the rules or conventions governing what counted as academic writing was often assumed to be part of "common sense" knowledge students had and were thus not explicitly taught within the disciplinary course." Kinneavy (1971) also indicated that "argumentation involves a statement of an issue, discussion of its pros and cons, and justification of support for one with the primary focus on the reader." Glenn et al. (2004) stated: "argumentation is the art and science of civil debate, dialogue and persuasion," while Nippold et al. (2005) noted that an argumentative essay required writers to embrace a particular point of view and try to convince the reader to adopt the same perspective or to perform a particular action. Besides, Ferretti et al. (2007) concluded that argumentative writing had been confirmed by researchers to be the hardest model in writing.

2. Research objectives

This study aimed to investigate the challenges EFL English-major college students facing when writing argumentative essays and find out the proper suggestions to promote their writing. Specifically, the study was designed to find out the answers to the following research question:

What are the EFL English-major college students' challenges when writing argumentative essays?

3. Research methods

The study employed a mixed-method.

3.1. Research design

The research was designed as mixed-method descriptive research with a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. In this study, the research was designed by focusing on to what extent EFL English-major college students face challenges when writing argumentative essays. The quantitative method, including a questionnaire, would be to explore the problems students encountered.

3.2. Participants

In this study, the participants' responses were collected from twenty-one participating students finishing the second year of the three-year English-major course at Soc Trang Teachers' Training College. Most of them are at the age of 20 and come from different districts in Soc Trang Province, South Vietnam.

Based on questionnaire participants' responses, the results showed that all of the students, more or less, had difficulties in writing argumentative essays. Most of them found it tough to use the appropriate vocabulary to express, especially the academic words and paraphrasing. Besides, six students among the participants were invited to an interview in order to find out the problems they got in writing argumentative essays and their solutions and suggestions to overcoming their difficulties.

3.3. Research instruments

In the study, as mentioned above, a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were used for collecting the information to answer only one research questions.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was developed and designed to collect data and answer the research question regarding the challenges students facing when writing argumentative essays. However, the participants sometimes provided the answers according to their real beliefs because they (a) do not want to give negative opinions on the method they are using, (b) are typically biased for positive, (c) may sometimes be obliged to answer in a particular way by the question wording, and (d) may not take the questionnaires seriously. Therefore, the researchers should combine it with other methods of data collection to verify the validity and reliability.

Interview

To acquire EFL Soc Trang Teacher's Training College students' challenges when writing argumentative essays and their solutions and suggestions to overcome the difficulties, the researchers decided to conduct a semi-structured interview. Thanks to the gained information from the semi-structured interviews, it was possible to compare and contrast the information, which made it possible to interpret and draw the conclusion from the findings. Regarding the questions for semi-structured interviews, a six-open-ended question interview for two purposes: To acquire intensive information about the challenges students face when writing argumentative essays and their solutions and suggestions to overcome the difficulties.

Data collection procedure

Designing the questionnaire

The questionnaire was based on the theoretical framework described in the literature review and was constructed after reviewing relevant research articles in the same field Gathumbi and Masembe (2005). It was initially written in English and consisted of 29 items with 6 clusters to explore the challenges students face when writing argumentative essays. These items were set up by Likert's scale of agreement with five points including 29 items based on a five-point scale as 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (neutral), 4 (agree), 5 (strongly agree). In the process of data analysis, the total percentage of disagreement is the combination of the first value (strongly disagree) and the second value (disagree). The third point (neutral) is kept as the original one. Similarly, the combination of the fourth value (agree) and the fifth value (strongly disagree) create the total percentage of agreement. There is no right or wrong answer since it is applicable to participants' knowledge and experience. The participants' answers and responses will be the primary data for the study.

The six main clusters of the designed questionnaire were presented in details as follows in Table 1.

Table 1 The six main clusters of the designed questionnaire

	Clusters	Items
1.	Content	1-5
2.	Organization	6-13
3.	Cohesion and coherence	14-17
4.	Style	18-22
5.	Grammar	23-26
6.	Form	27-29

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There were six aspects (clusters) mentioned in the questionnaire. The first aspect related to the content of the argumentative academic essays. It was categorized into five elements named "exploring the appropriate ideas, having enough vocabulary to express writer's thought, using academic words, giving reason (argument) and composing the degree of generality of the supporting ideas." The second aspect explored "the organization consisting of eight elements labeled the function and position of the thesis statement and restatement of an essay, topic sentence and concluding sentence of a paragraph." The third aspect relates to cohesion and coherence composed of four elements called the use of supporting ideas, transition words, listing signals and sentence connectors. The following five elements form the fourth aspect, style. They were moderating opinions, avoiding false analogy, avoiding generalization, avoiding irrelevant argument and avoiding begging the question. The fifth aspect was grammar possessing four elements named tenses, sentence combination, run-on sentences and parallelism. The last aspect was formed containing three elements. They were punctuation, spelling and capitalization.

The rationale for this design based on the aspects introduced in the Writing Process Book of Interaction II, second edition by Segal & Pavlik (1990) published by McGraw-Hill in 1990.

4. Results and discussions
4.1. Content
From the questionnaire

This section presented the results of the data as regards the content aspect of writing argumentative academic essays. It consisted of five difficulties that the students encountered, namely, exploring the appropriate ideas, the lack of vocabulary to express themselves well and fully in their writing, the use of academic words to make their essays more professional, the challenges to give persuasive reasons or argument for their point of view, and the balance in terms of the degree of generality of the supporting or controlling ideas in the thesis statement to produce good-view paragraphs and neat essays.

The challenges were explored, and the results are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2 Content (N =21)

	Clusters	D	N	A
1.	I find it difficult to explore the appropriate ideas.	3 (14.3%)	7 (33.3%)	11 (52.4%)
2.	I do not have enough vocabulary to express my thought.	0 (0%)	3 (14.3%)	18 (85.7%)
3.	I find it difficult to use the academic words.	0 (0%)	1 (4.8%)	20 (95.2%)
4.	It is hard for me to give a reason (argument) for each opinion.	1 (4.8%)	3 (14.3%)	17 (81%)
5.	It is difficult to compose the degree of generality of the supporting ideas.	3 (14.3%)	6 (28.6%)	12 (57.1%)

*D: Disagree; N: Neutral; A: Agree

As seen in Table 2, the majority of the participants showed their weaknesses about some skills related to the content necessary for writing a good argumentative essay. The point was that 95.2% of the students admitted they found it difficult to use academic words. Giving reasons or arguments for their stance seems to be tough (81%) because they lacked vocabulary (85.7%) and substantial opinions (52.4%). Also, more than half of the participants had difficulties in creating the degree of generality of the supporting ideas to ensure well-balanced paragraphs that follow.

From the interview

Regarding the results from semi-structured interviews, the data gained from the first question of the interview about the content aspect were presented as follows.

Six students all found it quite hard to explore the ideas for the essay, although each student had their own way. Most of them had problems giving reasons for their opinions. For the use of academic

words, students did not use them or used at times. Some solutions mentioned were practicing the vocabulary more by reading books, joining the English clubs, watching English programs on TV or the Internet. One student learned how to use the words in context. Some students responded as follows:

"To find the ideas for the essay, I study the topic and use my knowledge to analyze it."[…] "I don't use academic words frequently and exactly because they are attributive and hard to remember." (Student 1)

"I have difficulties to state the reasons for my point-of-view because I don't have adequate vocabulary boundary so I can't give the argument."(Student 2)

4.2. Organization

From the questionnaire

The questionnaire which was administered to study students' challenges in organizing the essays had eight items focusing on the function and position of main parts of an academic essay like the thesis statement and restatement of the essay, topic and concluding sentence of the paragraph. The challenges were explored. The results were shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3 Organization (N =21)

Clusters		D	N	A
6.	I do not know the function of the thesis statement of an essay.	10 (47.6%)	5 (23.8%)	6 (28.6%)
7.	I do not know the function of the topic sentence of a paragraph.	12 (57.1%)	9 (42.9%)	0 (0%)
8.	I do not know the function of the concluding sentence of a paragraph.	13 (61.9%)	8 (38.1%)	0 (0%)
9.	I do not know the function of the restatement of an essay.	9 (42.9%)	8 (38.1%)	4 (19%)
10.	I do not know the usual position of the thesis statement in an essay.	19 (90.5%)	2 (9.5%)	0 (0%)
11.	I do not know the usual position of the topic sentence in a paragraph.	21 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
12.	I do not know the usual position of the concluding sentence in a paragraph.	18 (85.7%)	1 (4.8%)	2 (9.5%)
13	I do not know the usual position of the restatement in an essay.	19 (90.5%)	2 (9.5%)	0 (0%)

D: Disagree; N: Neutral; A: Agree

In Table 3, the findings revealed that most of the participants had strong confidence in their knowledge of organizing the essay, especially the venue of the main parts in an essay. Item 11 gained the most positive responses from students. This advantage was highly significant. However, approximately one-third of the students were not sure about the function of these parts.

From the interview

For the organization of the paragraph, five of six students thought it was not too difficult to write thesis statements, topic sentences, concluding sentences and restatements of the essays. One thought they were quite easy to write. They suggested that the teacher should analyze more samples intensively and choose familiar topics with them. The respondents shared their context.

"I don't feel easy to write the thesis statement, the topic sentences, the concluding sentences and the restatement because some topics are not familiar with me, so it's hard for me to explore ideas and I don't have enough vocabulary to express." (Student 4)

"Writing a thesis statement isn't too difficult, but I often find it hard to write a topic sentence because it's general and difficult to develop. Concluding sentences and restatement aren't hard, either, but they take more time to think of because of paraphrasing the topic sentence." (Student 6)

4.3. Cohesion and coherence
    From the questionnaire

The third cluster consisted of four items (from 14 to 17) related to the mostly required cohesive devices used in writing to connect the ideas smoothly and naturally. The connection between the paragraphs and the supporting ideas in the thesis statement, the transition words, listing signals and sentence connectors were explored. The results are shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4 Cohesion and coherence (N =21)

	Clusters	D	N	A
14.	I do not know the use of supporting ideas.	9 (42.9%)	5 (23.8%)	7 (33.3%)
15.	I do not know the use of transition words.	14 (66.7%)	5 (23.8%)	2 (9.5%)
16.	I do not know the use of listing signals.	20 (95.2%)	1 (4.8%)	0 (0%)
17.	I do not know the use of sentence connectors.	11 (52.4%)	2 (9.5%)	8 (38.1%)

*D: Disagree; N: Neutral; A: Agree

The results in Table 4 showed that the majority of the respondents were positive for most of the items. It presented that the participants were aware of the cohesion and coherence in writing academic essays. More specifically, 95.2% of them knew the way of using listing signals. Half of the participants knew how to use transition words and sentence connectors. On the other hand, one-third of the students showed that they had difficulties in using sentence connectors, and they did not know the use of supporting ideas to make the essay coherent.

    From the interview

All the interviewees frequently used transition words, listing signals and sentence connectors in their essays. They said that they often confused the positions of these connectors because there were different types of connectors and the solutions were to study them again and again or ask friends for help. The respondents shared their experience.

"I frequently use transition words, listing signals and sentence connectors to link ideas, but sometimes in the wrong place." (Student 5)

"When I write paragraphs or essays, I frequently use transition words, listing signals and sentence connectors to make them more coherent and to be understood by readers." (Student 3)

4.4. Style
    From the questionnaire

The fourth cluster of the questionnaire, style of writing academic essays, consisted of five items (18 to 22). Table 5 presented the results of the hardness of moderating their opinions and avoiding false analogy, generalization, irrelevant argument and begging the question in writing.

Table 5 Style (N =21)

	Clusters	D	N	A
18.	Moderating opinions is hard to use.	4 (19%)	10 (47.6%)	7 (33.3%)
19.	It is hard to avoid false analogy.	9 (42.9%)	5 (23.8%)	7 (33.3%)
20.	It is hard to avoid generalization.	7 (33.3%)	7 (33.3%)	7 (33.3%)
21.	It is hard to avoid irrelevant argument.	5 (23.8%)	7 (33.3%)	9 (42.9%)

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22.	It is hard to avoid begging the question.	5 (23.8%)	6 (28.6%)	10 (47.6%)

D: Disagree; N: Neutral; A: Agree

The results in Table 5 indicated that the students had different acquisition about the writing styles. Begging the question was considered to be the most challenging part for them, and irrelevant argument placed the second. It is clear that the hard portion of students' problems was more than the easy one. Besides, the relatively high percentages of the "Neutral" on item 18 showed that the participants were not sure about moderating opinions.

From the interview

The point in items 19, 20, 21, 22 caused difficulties for the participants because the rules were somewhat similar and hard to remember and use. They thought they should practice using them more or read books or ask the teachers. The respondents shared their situation.

"The reasons for making mistakes are not to remember ideas or not to have different ideas. I read more materials on the Internet or ask the teachers." (Student 6)

"To solve the problems, I should read more books and newspapers or on the Internet to get formal words." (Student 5)

4.5. Grammar

From the questionnaire

Four items belonging to the grammar section in the questionnaire were administered to study students' challenges in ensuring their grammatical knowledge when writing the essays. They were common mistakes students make. The results were shown in Table 6 below.

Table 6 Grammar (N =21)

	Clusters	D	N	A
23.	I often use wrong tenses.	2 (9.5%)	4 (19%)	15 (71.4%)
24.	I find it difficult to combine sentences.	2 (9.5%)	8 (38.1%)	11 (52.4%)
25.	I often write run-on sentences.	11 (52.4%)	7 (33.3%)	3 (14.3%)
26.	I often make mistakes on parallelism in academic writing.	5 (23.8%)	3 (14.3%)	13 (61.9%)

D: Disagree; N: Neutral; A: Agree

As in Table 6, most of the participants misused tenses in writing essays (71.4%). The parallel construction caused difficulties as well. The averagely high percentage of "Agree" on item 24 showed that students still lacked the knowledge of sentence combination, which is very important in writing essays.

From the interview

All of the participants realized the importance of grammar in writing essays. They usually misused the tenses because they did not know the usage well. Two of them revealed that they often made mistakes in combining sentences. They thought they should learn the rules carefully and carefully or asks friends for help or practice more. The respondents shared as follows.

"Grammar plays an important role in a sentence. I often use the wrong tenses because I don't study them well. Sometimes, I forget their usage." (Student 4)

"Grammar plays an important role in producing a good and meaningful writing and showing the writer's level. I often make sentence combination mistakes because I misuse compound and complex sentences. (Student 3)

4.6. Form

From the questionnaire

The three popular points of the form mentioned in this study are punctuation, spelling, and capitalization. The challenges were explored, and the results were shown in Table 7 below.

Table 7 Form (N =21)

	Clusters	D	N	A
27.	Punctuation rules are difficult to use.	6 (28.6%)	10 (47.6%)	5 (23.8%)
28.	I often make mistakes on spelling.	8 (38.1%)	5 (23.8%)	8 (38.1%)
29.	Capitalization rules are complicated.	10 (47.6%)	8 (38.1%)	3 (14.3%)

*D: Disagree; N: Neutral; A: Agree

The results in Table 7 showed that participants had a diverse background of the three points. The most prominent problem is spelling (38.1%). Nearly half of the students (47.6%) were not sure about the punctuation rules.

From the interview

Three of the interviewees emphasized that punctuation; spelling and capitalization were quite easy to use. They used them correctly because the rules were simple, whereas the other students often made spelling mistakes since they did not use the words much. They wished the teacher helped them to practice more. The respondents said that:

"Punctuation, spelling and capitalization are rather difficult to use, especially spelling. I often make spelling mistakes because of the similarity among them. Pronouncing wrongly causes spelling mistakes." (Student 1)

"I find it relatively easy to use the punctuation, spelling and capitalization. I often make spelling mistakes because of the similarity among them." (Student 2)

"I hope the teacher checks students' vocabulary boundary more time or asks them to write dictation and corrects spelling mistakes." (Student 1)

From the results of the questionnaire and interview data, it was found that EFL English-major college students at Soc Trang Teachers' Training College faced some challenges when writing argumentative essays. The results of the current study were in line with the hypothesis and results of the previous studies Bahri and Sugeng (2010). In the study, the analysis of participants' responses in the questionnaire and interview revealed that the participants had difficulties in writing argumentative academic essays in some language aspects (Gathumbi & Masembe, 2005).

In producing the content of the essays, students found it the most difficulties reported. They had a great challenge of using the vocabulary, especially academic words. It is in line with the hypothesis and results of the previous studies (Lado, 1955; Mehring, 2005; Shejbalova, 2006). Besides, the reasons or arguments used to support the writer's viewpoint were also an obstacle because they were short of vocabulary and substantial opinions. 95.2% of the students in the research admitted they found it difficult to use academic words. Similarly, the results were corresponding to the result of the study conducted by (Nippold and Ward-Lonergan, 2010; Crowhurst (1991). Students tended to choose familiar topics since they easily found evidence and produce more coherent arguments and counterarguments (Stapleton (2001).

Linguistic difficulties such as concerns about grammatical structures, word choice, and academic tone and style were also indicated. Grammar rules, especially tenses and parallel structure, caused a problem for many students in writing. The main writing difficulties students found concerning grammar was the low understanding of the grammar (Bahri & Sugeng, 2010).

Writing styles seemed to be a challenge for students. For students, the elements embedded were as

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tough as the typical style of writing-formal writing. This finding appeared to be corresponding to the findings of the study of Oshima & Hogue (2017).

Moreover, spelling and punctuation were two elements shared writing difficulties among students. The most prominent problem was the spelling. Nearly half of the students were not sure about the punctuation rules. The results seemed to be in line with Frith (1980), (Bancha, 2013) & (Harmer (2001).

5. Conclusions and implications
5.1. Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the challenges EFL English-major college students facing when writing argumentative essays and found out the proper suggestions to promote their writing by applying a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. Therefore, their challenges in writing argumentative essays were revealed. The study was conducted with 21 participants from 21 participating students finishing the second year of the three-year English-major course at Soc Trang Teachers' Training College. Data were collected from the questionnaire with 29 Likert-five-point scale items, MP3 recordings, and semi-structured interviews.

The results of the study supported the following conclusions.

What are the EFL English-major college students' challenges when writing argumentative essays?

The research question addressed the challenges the EFL English-major college students had when writing argumentative essays. This research study aimed to gauge the overall quality of students' writing performance and identify the difficulties that EFL English-major students were encountering when writing argumentative essays. The findings showed that providing helpful information about learners' weaknesses in their writing task could raise awareness among EFL instructors and learners. This assessment could 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 valued descriptions would be beneficial for EFL instructors to design and develop their writing programs and teach effectively to further support learners' writing development.

Students lacked the vocabulary to express themselves well and fully in their writing, especially the use of academic words made their essays more professional. It happened because students did not use academic words or used them at times. The challenges of giving persuasive reasons or argument for their point of view were quite significant because they did not have a rich vocabulary boundary, so they wished to have familiar topics to write. Besides, the balance in terms of the degree of generality of the supporting or controlling ideas in the thesis statement could help them to produce good-view paragraphs and neat essays, but most of them could not get the point.

Most students had strong confidence in their knowledge of organizing the essay, especially the positions of the thesis statement and restatement of the essay, topic, and concluding sentence of the paragraph. However, some students were not sure about the function of the elements. The majority of the students were positive for the use of the supporting ideas in the thesis statement, the transition words, listing signals and sentence connectors. It presented that they realized the value of cohesion and coherence in writing academic essays. Nevertheless, one-third of the students showed that they had difficulties in using sentence connectors, and they did not know the use of supporting ideas to make the essay coherent.

The style of writing academic essays consisting of moderating opinions and avoiding false analogy, generalization, irrelevant argument, and begging the question was a matter of concerns. Begging the question was considered to be the most difficult element. For most students, the unclear rule is the reason.

Grammar in general and tenses, in particular, was one of the concerns to students and always a challenge in writing the essays, although they had been said it was not as important as some other elements. Also, students had a different level of the punctuation, spelling and capitalization. The most prominent

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problem was the spelling. Students still were not sure about the punctuation rules. The reason for the problem came from their weak vocabulary boundary.

Some suggestions of students from the interviews in writing argumentative essays should be considered. Most of the students wanted teachers to help them to enhance their writing. Teachers should give them more chances to practice using the language. They needed a clear explanation of the lesson from the teachers. This phenomenon is ordinary as they were low-level students who were short of English competence and the ability of acquisition.

5.2. Pedagogical implication
Implications for educational administrators
First, extra compulsory classes of general English for low-level students must be organized at the educational institutions so that students can quickly acquire the basic knowledge of English. Second, EFL teachers should be given more opportunities to develop their profession by joining seminars and workshops about teaching argumentative essays. In other words, it would be essential for them to get access to the updated knowledge of teaching and teaching methods through some workshops, meetings, or training sessions in writing academic essays to encourage more experienced teachers to share their experiences and knowledge with other teachers.

Implications for EFL teachers
It would be suggested that the EFL teachers should pay attention to the characteristics of the students they are responsible for when teaching essay writing. Students need a good mood to produce good writing, especially low-level students. Teachers should spend time and be patient to help them practice writing as much as possible. Teachers try to clarify the lessons so that weak students can perceive knowledge.

5.3. Limitations of the present study
The first limitation of this study was that the number of participants was small, only 21 participants, so the results were less generalization. The interviews were conducted with only six participants. Therefore, the data from the sample more or less could not be fully supported the study results. The second limitation was that the current study is conducted with only two instruments. These two tools were not entirely reliable because they were only self-reported data which may not guarantee the best outcome. The third limitation was related to time, for the limited period given might not be sufficient to investigate students' writing difficulties. Lastly, the limitation could also occur in the participants who lacked English competence and the ability of acquisition. Most of them found it hard to memorize the lessons to answer the questions in the questionnaire precisely.

5.4. Recommendations for further research
For generalization, it will be better to conduct with more students from different language levels to provide persuasive generalized results. Moreover, further research should combine students' essay papers together with the two instruments in this research to have a better quality of the data.

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teaching and learning English in Vietnamese higher education context on the way to the regional and global integration and cooperation.

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