

## THE INFLUENCE OF NATIVE CULTURE IN EFL ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING

*Kusumarasyati*

Universitas Negeri Surabaya  
unfound.door@gmail.com

### Abstract

Building a strong argument in written form could be challenging for learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) for two reasons: they are still grappling with the target language and have little knowledge about the rhetoric in the target culture. This paper focuses on the latter, examining the problems that the Indonesian learners face when writing an argumentative text in English due to cultural differences. Twenty eight adult EFL learners who participated in a language training to improve their English proficiency were asked to write an argumentative essay consisting of an introductory paragraph, two paragraphs in the body and a concluding paragraph. In this paper the analysis was confined to the introductory paragraphs that they wrote, and the results showed that the way they organized the ideas to build an argument in the introductory paragraphs was influenced by their native culture to a certain degree. Rather than expressing their thoughts and opinions in a linear fashion like native speakers of English commonly do, some of them wrote their arguments by beating around the bush, making it harder for the readers to identify and understand these writers' stance about a certain issue. Moreover, some others even avoided giving an overt argument in their paragraphs and embraced both contrasting views about a particular issue instead. Some implications for the teaching of writing argumentative text were proposed.

**Keywords:** writing, argumentative, culture, EFL

### 1. INTRODUCTION

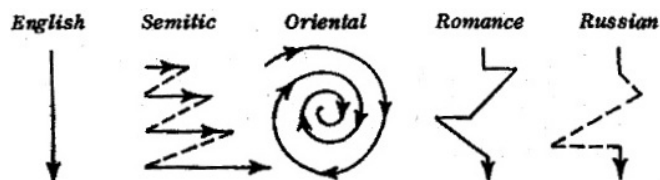
Writing a good argumentative text is crucial for EFL learners at tertiary level because they gain and disseminate knowledge with others on daily basis, and in doing so need to express their stance and convince others that it is the most sensible one by providing strong evidence. The pace of change and improvement in communication technology and the knowledge in their own field has been so fast that keeping up to date to the latest information and confirming their stance need to be done quite frequently. Without good capability in writing a sound argumentative piece of writing, achieving the above goal is hardly possible.

Although building an argument is a vital skill that the EFL learners must acquire to participate in the knowledge sharing in universities and colleges, informal observations and interviews indicate that some learners in Indonesia seem to encounter difficulties in doing it for two reasons. First, they are still grappling with the target language due to lack of exposure to English, little awareness about writing strategies or others. For them, constructing some well-formed, meaningful English sentences in sequence to discuss a particular issue from their own perspective can be a tedious task, resulting in an inadequate argumentative text. Another reason for the difficulties is little knowledge about the rhetoric of the target culture on the part of the EFL learners. As this paper focuses on the challenges related to rhetoric rather than language ability, the former deserves further elaboration in the rest of this section.

Kaplan (1966, p. 11) defined rhetoric as '... a mode of thinking or a more of "finding all available means" for the achievement of a designated end. Accordingly, rhetoric concerns itself basically with what goes on in the mind rather than with what comes out of the mouth.' In his monumental work where he studied hundreds of college essays written by students with different cultural backgrounds, he concluded that rhetoric had logic as its basis, and logic was heavily influenced

by the culture where they lived and grew up. Thus, students belonging to one culture had different thought patterns from those of another culture, producing essays which were also structured differently. He categorized the thought patterns into five types: English, Semitic, Oriental, Romance, Russian (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Thought Patterns (Kaplan, 1966)



Kaplan's theory asserts that *English* writers tend to think in a linear fashion, stating their ideas directly. *Semitic* writers such as Arabic or Hebrew, on the other hand, express their ideas by presenting both the positive and negative ones in parallel constructions. Writers of *Oriental* origin (i.e. Asian, including Indonesian) tend to be indirect, working around the point rather than getting to point and addressing the topic. *Romance* writers—from countries speaking Latin-based languages such as French, Italian, Romanian and Spanish—usually communicate ideas by perform digression by introducing different material to enrich the communication. Similarly, *Russian* writers are digressive in communication, but there is a slight difference: they usually express parallel ideas in the digression.

This seminal work triggered other researchers to investigate the rhetoric in academic writing in depth and provide empirical support to the theory. For example, Abu Rass (2011) found that teacher trainees whose mother tongue was Arabic frequently used repetition and exaggeration in writing an English text in order to convince others and make the persuasion stronger, which indicated influence from their native Arab culture. Even Burrough-Boenisc (2002) found a rhetorical influence from the native culture when she examined the English scientific papers written by Dutch scholars in five journals. Although English and Dutch are both West-Germanic languages, the native speakers of both languages obviously have different cultures and the cultural interference could be observed in the papers they wrote. Dutch scholars who wrote papers in English tended to construct shorter sentences and use fewer hedges (such as *probably*, *may*, and other expressions to decrease the strength of a claim) than the native speakers of English.

The present paper attempts to add more empirical evidence of contrastive rhetoric by investigating cultural influence occurring in the English argumentative texts written by the native speakers of Bahasa Indonesia. In line with the original work of Kaplan (1966) that aimed to describe objectively the existence of thought patterns different from the English one rather than evaluating them from the point of view of the English speakers, this study only presents the thought patterns of Indonesians that could be inferred from the argumentative text they have written, without any prescriptive comments of what they *should* look like.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study was approached qualitatively, using document analysis as the research design. The population of the study was twenty eight lecturers from various departments (except English Department) in Universitas Negeri Surabaya (Unesa) who attended a two-week English course held by the university in October 2015 to improve their English proficiency, and total sample was drawn from this population so the number of both were the same. While taking the course, the participants were required to write an argumentative essay—as one of the assignment in the

writing session—about the extent to which they agreed or disagreed on the prominent role of the Internet in daily life. This study, however, only included the introduction of the essay because in this key paragraph the participants' flow of thought in building arguments at the earliest stage could be observed and it determined the quality of the arguments written in the rest of the essay, so in the rest of this paper the term 'argumentative texts' referred to 'the introductory paragraphs of the argumentative essays.' These 28 argumentative texts became the documents to be investigated in this study, yielding qualitative data in the form of words. Analysis of the data was performed in the following procedures: (1) familiarizing and organizing, (2) coding and reducing, and (3) interpreting and representing (Ary et al, 2010). The results of the analysis could be reported in the next section.

### **3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Many of the argumentative texts produced by the research participants confirmed the contrastive rhetoric theory proposed by Kaplan (1966), in that the Oriental thoughts flowed in circular direction around a certain topic prior to stating their argument about it. An instance of such a thought pattern was shown in text [1].

Today, from children, teenagers and adults to Internet. Almost all of them require and utilize the internet in everyday. There are many features that are available on the internet ranging from search, social media, buying and selling transactions, data transfer, and so forth. In the following paragraphs will discuss the advantages and disadvantage of internet usage.

Before writing this text, the participant had got sufficient explanation about how to organize ideas in the introductory paragraph of an English argumentative essay, i.e. in a linear fashion—from the most general to the most specific ideas related to a particular issue, ending with their personal opinion about this issue. Nevertheless, she still demonstrated the circular pattern of thought when developing the above paragraph, which discussed some hardly interconnected ideas related to the internet: the users (the first sentence), the daily use (the second sentence) and the features (the third sentence). The last sentence did not reveal her personal opinion about the internet, either.

Another example of the circular pattern of thought could be seen in text [2], where a series of ideas which seemed to lack interrelatedness were expressed into a paragraph that the writer considered a sufficient introduction to an argumentative essay.

World is changing. Information would be transferred quickly now. Some people never worry to give and get information from another side world, like news would be known and transferred like an arrow or high speed super cars. It easier could be happen because of internet exist. Now days, internet is the most powerful tools in the world with many resources and services. However, one should have to know the advantages and disadvantages about internet.

This paragraph began with a statement about the world which was changing, followed by the information about quick transfer of information, people's feelings about the transfer, the existence of internet, and finally the internet as a powerful tool. The writer expressed some ideas around and around concerning transfer of information and the internet, then at the end of the paragraph stated the necessity of knowing the advantages and disadvantages of the internet without articulating his opinion at all.

In addition to the circular pattern of thought, the influence of Indonesian culture was apparent in the way some participants attempted to express a 'balanced' opinion rather than taking a certain side. One instance of such an approach in stating an argument was presented in text [3].

Internet has become a most outstanding innovation in communication in history of human live. As with every innovation but internet has its advantages and disadvantages. Now the Internet has become the most excellent communication tool for people worldwide. The Internet has brought a new world into computer or mobile device. But internet also has a disadvantages like theft of

information, porn, virus, spam, etc. in my opinion the internet has potential to make our live feel comfortable, on the other side internet also can give a problem in our live. It is determined by the choice when we are online using internet.

Initially the writer brought up the advantages and disadvantages of the internet, but rather than highlighting one of them and supporting or discouraging the use of the internet, she concluded the paragraph by offering an open-ended suggestion to the readers. She gave the readers an option of using or not using the internet instead of stating her own argument about it. Similarly, text [4] presented a 'balanced' opinion.

Internet becomes very functional in the modern era as it indicates the advancement of communication technology. Many of its users believe that internet brings lots of benefits since they use it for searching valuable information and entertaining. Others, however, argue that it can result some dangers over internet abuse. In my opinion, I believe that internet can have both its own advantages and disadvantages as discussed in the following paragraph.

Although the writer made his argument very obvious by utilizing the phrase 'In my opinion' in the very last sentence, the content of this sentence lack clear statement about his own point of view in relation to the internet. Like the writer of text [3], he thought that the internet could be useful and otherwise, stating it in one sentence.

These examples of argumentative texts demonstrated that the organization of ideas in academic writing was culture-specific as Kaplan (1997) claimed. Indonesian culture—the native culture of the research participants—might play a role in making some of them organize the introductory paragraph in English in a circular fashion rather than a linear one. In relation to politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Blum-Kulka, 1987), articulating a personal opinion indirectly by going around and around a topic could actually be a strategy adopted by the writer to soften the persuasive force. For them, the more indirect they were in expressing an argument, the more polite they became in the academic written communication. In a similar vein, avoiding clear statement of agreement or disagreement in writing an argumentative text was probably a crucial strategy used by the writers to reduce the level of coerciveness of their point of view. Wishing to be polite, they refrained from forcing the readers to accept their argument and presented a 'balanced' opinion that acknowledge agreement and disagreement at the same time.

Such interference from the native culture was definitely unconscious (Kaplan, 1997). In that circumstance, the writer possessed no or very little awareness that the native culture affected they way they organized ideas in writing an argumentative text in the target language. They might not even be aware that differences existed in the rhetoric of the native and target languages. Taking these facts into account, the findings of the present study led to some implications in the teaching of English, especially the teaching of argumentative text in academic writing classes. First, it is essential to raise the learners' awareness about the different types of rhetoric resulting from cultural differences. In this way, they could adapt to the best type of rhetoric when they are writing in a particular language. Second, explicit instructions on English rhetoric should be conducted intensively in the teaching of writing to provide the learners ample opportunity to adapt to the use of this rhetoric and achieve optimum results in expressing their ideas to the readers.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

To conclude, the learners' native culture did influence the way they organized ideas in writing an argumentative text in English. The introductory paragraph of the argumentative essays written by the research participants whose native culture was Indonesian reflected traces of politeness in Indonesian decorum, two of which were the circular pattern of thought and refusal to take sides in expressing an argument. Implications for the teaching of writing in English were proposed, and it would even be more valuable if an ethnographic study is conducted to obtain deeper insight into

the cultural challenges that Indonesian writers have in building an argument in English to follow up the present study.

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