

The Effect of Topic Familiarity on EFL Argumentative Writing Performance

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Abstract: *Writing is a productive skill that serves as a means of communication, so ideas and information must be structured clearly, logically, and easily understood by readers. In the EFL context, argumentative writing skills are often a challenge because students are not only required to master linguistic aspects, but also to be able to develop ideas, construct arguments, and provide relevant evidence. One factor suspected of influencing the quality of argumentative writing is topic familiarity. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the effect of topic familiarity on EFL students' argumentative writing performance. This study used a quasi-experimental design involving 60 students and was conducted over a ten-week period. Before the treatment was administered, participants took a pre-test to measure their initial writing ability. In the familiar topic group, students were asked to choose the topic they were most familiar with from ten provided topics. Meanwhile, in the unfamiliar topic group, four topics were predetermined by the researchers. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and an Independent Samples t-test. The results showed that students who wrote using familiar topics performed better ($M=81.9$) than those who wrote on unfamiliar topics ($M=76.77$). Statistical analysis showed a significant difference between the two groups ($p < 0.05$). These findings indicate that topic familiarity contributes positively to the development of EFL learners' argumentative writing skills by facilitating more effective idea development and argument construction.*

Keywords: *topic familiarity; argumentative writing; EFL learners; tutor questioning*

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INTRODUCTION

Writing is a crucial academic skill that supports effective communication and knowledge construction in EFL contexts (Isgiarno et al., 2020). Unfortunately, being able to write needs a long journey since everyone cannot teach and learn writing ‘perfectly’ only in a matter of weeks. Meanwhile, effective writing requires coherence, organization, and awareness of genre conventions (Siekmann et al., 2022). Writing is regarded as a communication tool, so it must be communicated effectively in which the words and ideas should be organized well to make sense to a reader.

However, in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context it has been claimed that among the four language skills, writing is regarded as a difficult skill for most EFL learners (Isgiarno et al., 2020). Werdiningsih et al., (2024) and Sulistyo et al., (2019) argue that writing is difficult since writing work takes a long process starting from generating ideas, organizing ideas, and developing ideas into readable text. Imelda et al., (2019) state that writing is a complex process. Most of the learners find difficulties in conveying their idea, selecting proper words, using correct grammar, generating ideas, and developing them into a suitable organizational pattern. Meanwhile, Rusmawan (2022) explains that writing is not an easy skill to master since its difficulty in generating, organizing, and translating ideas into readable text.

Another problem faced by the learners in writing is writing anxiety negatively affects students’ confidence and overall writing performance (Kexia, 2023). Isgiarno et al., (2020) argue that learners feel difficulties where to begin and are often frustrated since they do not know how to say about the topic in writing. However Fareed et al., (2016) state that those problems are not only caused by the learners themselves, but it can also be caused by the teachers’ uninteresting and monotonous style in teaching writing.

Learning to write has commonly been one of the most neglected areas in language learning, since many teachers prefer to dedicate more time and efforts to teach other language skills (Setyowati et al., 2017). Puteri et al., (2022) suggest that in teaching writing, the teachers should apply a strategy, method and also teaching medium that encourage the learners to be more motivated and active in the teaching and learning of writing.

One factor suspected of contributing to the persistence of writing difficulties in students is limited knowledge of the topic being written about (Rahimpour & Hazar, 2007).

In the context of argumentative writing, students are not only required to master linguistic aspects, but also to be able to generate ideas, present supporting evidence, and construct logical and systematic arguments (Gustilo & Gustilo, 2016). Insufficient background knowledge on a topic tends to hinder content development, argument organization, and maintaining coherence between sections of an essay.

Conversely, a familiar topic has the potential to reduce cognitive load because students can draw on prior knowledge and personal experience in the process of generating and elaborating ideas. From a cognitive perspective, topic familiarity activates relevant schemas and facilitates access to necessary information during the writing process (Pornour, 2014). Therefore, topic familiarity is increasingly being viewed as an important variable that can influence EFL students' writing performance, particularly in argumentative writing tasks that require the integration of content knowledge and critical thinking skills. Based on a review of previous research, several conceptual and methodological gaps can be identified that still require further in-depth investigation.

The first gap is on the way of choosing the topic. Topic familiarity helps learners generate ideas more easily and express them more effectively in writing (Kexia, 2023). It means that the previous researchers felt sure that the topic is familiar and unfamiliar for the students. In this study there are ten topics provided then the learners may choose four most familiar topics, when the learners felt that those ten topics were not familiar at all, they were allowed to use their own topics.

The second gap is the writing aspects. Since Salimi (2012), Kord (2018) focused on the narrative essay, therefore they took the score on the aspects of complexity, accuracy, and fluency. Argumentative writing is more complex and requires higher-level reasoning and organization skills (Siekman et al., 2022).

Given the various difficulties EFL learners face in producing argumentative writing and the limited empirical evidence regarding the influence of topic familiarity on the quality of their writing, further research is needed. Based on this objective, this study aims to answer the following research question: To what extent does topic familiarity influence EFL learners' argumentative writing performance?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Factors Affecting EFL Writing Performance

In the essay writing process, cognitive ability is a fundamental factor influencing the quality of the resulting writing (Jang, 2024). Writing does not solely involve mastery of linguistic aspects but also demands the writer's ability to access, manage, and integrate relevant knowledge into the text. A cognitive psychology perspective views knowledge as stored in the form of organized schemata, enabling individuals to process information,

build understanding, and develop ideas systematically during the writing process. Therefore, success in producing quality writing depends heavily on the writer's ability to utilize various forms of knowledge that support the process of constructing and developing ideas.

According to Jang (2024), there are five types of knowledge that play a crucial role in writing activities for second language (L2) learners: context knowledge, genre knowledge, process knowledge, system knowledge, and content knowledge. Context knowledge relates to an understanding of text characteristics, cultural background, and reader expectations. Genre knowledge encompasses an understanding of the communicative purpose and conventions inherent in a particular text type. Process knowledge refers to the strategies used in planning, composing, and revising writing, while systems knowledge encompasses mastery of vocabulary, grammar, and linguistic rules necessary to produce effective text. Content knowledge, on the other hand, refers to the writer's understanding of concepts, information, and ideas related to the topic being discussed (Athanassopoulos et al., 2023). In the context of argumentative writing, content knowledge plays a crucial role because it serves as the foundation for writers to develop logical arguments, present relevant ideas, and support their opinions with adequate evidence and reasoning.

Topic Familiarity in EFL Writing

As a productive skill, writing can have fruitful results if the learners are advised to use the familiar topic. Topic familiarity in this study refers to the knowledge in a certain topic that includes conceptual knowledge, self-knowledge, and meta-cognitive (Jang, 2024). The main concern in this study is conceptual knowledge because it can be more identifiable than other dimensions. These knowledge dimensions come from the cognitive domain of Bloom's taxonomy. Each knowledge requires the learners to remember, understand, apply, analyse, evaluate, and create an argumentative essay.

Topic familiarity is regarded as a factor contributing to the English skills when learners write an argumentative essay. Mudawy (2024) indicated that the learners' score showed higher by giving them familiar topics than unfamiliar topics. In a similar study, Syafar (2018), Indah et al., (2017), and Mahmoudi (2017) state that topic familiarity had a positive impact on accuracy and fluency of learners' oral performance but not on the complexity. Golestan (2016) and Khorasani (2015) mention that the familiarity of the topic could motivate the learners because they could get better comprehension of the text. Jang (2024) states that topic familiarity enables the learners to balance between meaning and form indicating that it integrates their linguistic knowledge to their argumentative essay writing performance. By giving familiar topics, it can encourage the learners to achieve their pedagogical knowledge.

In connection to the previous findings, Minh (2024) had conducted research about the difficulties found by the learners in developing argumentative essays. He stated that in writing an argumentative essay, the learners were 1) lack of analysis or criticality indicated that the learners were unable to use information for a certain purpose; 2) lack of evidence concerning with the failure to use the sources to support claims as evidence; and 3) the learners wrote unrelated information such as irrelevant sentences.

Contradictory to the findings above, according to Kazemi & Zarei (2015), with the more familiar topic, the student writers are able to arrange their focus from “what to write” to “how to write well”. Finally, it can be concluded that when the learners lack knowledge of what an argumentative essay requires, they will be lower on the density of information.

Topic familiarity somehow, is still considered under researched. It indicates the need to reveal its role in helping learners to increase their written performance. Topic familiarity dealing with argumentative text the learners produced have been conducted by some researchers. As Mudawy (2024) revealed that when the learners got a familiar topic, they would get a higher score in the writing performance, and they also would be better in critical thinking skill. Meanwhile, Jang (2024) argued that teacher-initiated topics of the topic familiarity gave better performance in writing argumentative essays.

The teacher-initiated topic in which the learners are familiar with is very crucial in affecting learners’ argumentative essay quality if the teachers are really aware of the features of an argumentative essay. According to Setyowati et al., (2017), the learners had only limited and incorrect concepts of argumentative essays. They have difficulties in applying the guideline and instruction in writing argumentative essays. Mostly the learners lack proving evidence and stating their personal opinion, also argued that the features of argumentation like criticality, analysis, and discussion were not explained clearly by the teachers.

METHOD

A quasi-experimental design was employed due to the use of intact classroom groups without random assignment. The study began with the administration of a pretest, followed by an eight-week treatment (April-June 2025), and ended with a posttest. To ensure methodological rigor, comprehensive procedures were implemented to establish instrument validity and reliability, maintain treatment fidelity, and conduct appropriate statistical analyses.

Participants

The subjects of this study are the learners of the English Education Department of the PGRI Kanjuruhan University of Malang in the academic year 2024-2025 who have passed paragraph writing courses offered in the University. There were two classes each consisting of 30 learners. This course has 3 credits, so the learners attended 150 minutes in a week.

Data Collection Technique and Procedure

The writing used as the instruments were argumentative writing pre-test and post-test. Those tests were developed by the researchers themselves. The analytic scoring rubric was used in this study since it has components of writing and those components are evaluated separately. The analytic scoring rubric in this study is adapted from Pennsylvania Department of Education and Tennessee Department of Education. An analytic rubric assessing logic, organization, language, and content was used to ensure comprehensive evaluation. Each component has 4 categories; they are excellent to very good, good to adequate, fair to poor, and very poor.

To guarantee the quality of the research instrument, a series of procedures were conducted to confirm its validity and reliability. This study fulfilled the construct validity since the researchers tested the learners' ability in arranging the claim, presenting reason, evidence, counterarguments and arranging the argument logically and coherently. It also fulfilled the content validity. The test contains the materials that the learners should master in argumentative essay writing. The analytic scoring rubric was used in this study since it has components of writing and those components are evaluated separately.

To ensure assessment reliability, the scoring process involved two independent raters. Both raters were English Language Education lecturers with over five years of experience teaching academic writing courses and evaluating EFL learners' essays at the university level. Prior to the scoring, both raters attended a training session led by the principal researchers. The training aimed to establish a common understanding of the analytical assessment rubric used, including the assessment criteria for content, writing organization, language use, and argument development.

During the training session, the raters were asked to independently assess a number of sample argumentative essays. The assessment results were then discussed to reach a consensus regarding the interpretation of the rubric descriptors and the applied scoring standards. Any discrepancies in scores were reviewed and resolved through discussion until a consensus was reached. This calibration process was carried out to increase consistency in assessments between raters and minimize the potential for subjectivity before the evaluation of the participants' essays was conducted.

To measure reliability coefficient, Pearson Product Moment (for the correlation between the two scores) and Coefficient Alpha was employed to assess the internal consistency of the final scores derived from two raters for each essay. The correlation between the raters' scores and the alpha coefficient were calculated using SPSS version 24. The inter-rater reliability was high ($\alpha = 0.87$), indicating strong consistency between the two raters.

The research was conducted over a ten-week duration using a structured procedure to ensure systematic execution and consistency throughout all stages of the study. During the first week, the pre-test was given to the learners in order to find out the information about the learners' writing performance. In the treatment process (meeting 2 to 9), the difference was in choosing the topic. In regard to the familiar topics used in this study, the researchers spread 10 various topics to the learners and asked them to arrange starting from the most familiar topic to the most unfamiliar one. If the learners believed that those topics were not familiar with them, they were asked to give their own familiar topic. Those topics are 1) Social media and students' lives, 2) Online learning in higher education, 3) Artificial Intelligence in education, 4) Part-time jobs for students, 5) Smartphone use in the classroom, 6) Academic grades and success, 7) Internship programs for university students, 8) Environmental responsibility among young people, 9) Physical exercise and academic performance, and 10) Collaborative learning versus individual learning. After it, the learners were asked to choose 4 topics to be written on the treatment process (Table 1).

Table 1.

The Treatment for Familiar Topic Group

Meeting	Experimental Group	Time	Total Time
1	Pre-test	150'	150'
2	Reviewing and giving background knowledge Planning (making outline with teacher's guidance for the 1 st familiar topic)	30' 120'	150'
3	Developing the outline, Composing the draft Reading and editing	60' 90'	150'
4	Reviewing and giving background knowledge Planning (making outline with teacher's guidance for the 2 nd familiar topic)	30' 120'	150'
5	Developing the outline, Composing the draft Reading and editing	60' 90'	150'
6	Reviewing and giving background knowledge Planning (making outline with teacher's guidance for the 3 rd familiar topic)	30' 120'	150'
7	Developing the outline, Composing the draft Reading and editing	60' 90'	150'
8	Reviewing and giving background knowledge	30' 120'	150'

	Planning (making outline with teacher's guidance for the 4 th familiar topic)		
9	Developing the outline, Composing the draft Reading and editing	60' 90'	150'
10	Post-test	150'	150'

Meanwhile, the researchers gave four topics for the group of unfamiliar topics namely 1) Technology makes people more alone, 2) Smoking in public places should be banned, 3) People can succeed in life by working in the field of art, and 4) Money can buy happiness. The consideration of choosing those topics were based on Indonesian "writers" own background knowledge and covered in the curriculum of writing essay university learners. During these sessions, the learners were given the background knowledge, asked to arrange the outline, develop the outline, and compose the draft (Table 2). The last are reading and editing their writing. In the 10th meeting the researchers used to do a post-test. Here the learners were given the topic "Gym helps the learners perform better in all their classes". This topic was chosen since the learners were familiar with gym under the time limit of 150 minutes, the learners wrote argumentative essays.

Table 2.

The Treatment for Unfamiliar Topic Group

Meeting	Experimental Group	Time	Total Time
1	Pre-test	150'	150'
2	Reviewing and giving background knowledge Planning (making outline with teacher's guidance, topic: Technology Makes People More Alone)	30' 120'	150'
3	Developing the outline, Composing the draft Reading and editing	60' 90'	150'
4	Reviewing and giving background knowledge Planning (making outline with teacher's guidance, topic: Smoking in Public Places Should be Banned)	30' 120'	150'
5	Developing the outline, Composing the draft Reading and editing	60' 90'	150'
6	Reviewing and giving background knowledge Planning (making outline with teacher's guidance, topic: People can be Succeed in Life by Working in the Field of Art)	30' 120'	150'
7	Developing the outline, Composing the draft Reading and editing	60' 90'	150'
8	Reviewing and giving background knowledge Planning (making outline with teacher's guidance, topic: Money can Buy Happiness)	30' 120'	150'
9	Developing the outline, Composing the draft Reading and editing	60' 90'	150'
10	Post-test	150'	150'

Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study employed a systematic quantitative approach to evaluate the effectiveness of topic familiarity on EFL learners' argumentative writing. Descriptive statistics, such as mean scores, standard deviations, and frequency distributions, were initially calculated to provide an overview of EFL learners' performance on both the pretest and post-test. The Levene's testing (Creswell, 2013) was employed to test homogeneity of the learners' ability and the collected data in this study. It was aimed at establishing that the learners' entrance behavior and the data from the two groups, namely the control and the experimental groups, were similar or equal. Subsequently, the normality testing of this study used the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test (Creswell, 2013) in order to decide the collected data coming from the groups that had normal distribution. When the normality and homogeneity assumption was satisfied, independent sample t tests were initially calculated to provide an overview of EFL learners' performance on both the pretest and post-test.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Prior to the treatment in the 2 groups, a pre-test was given to all learners. It was aimed to inform the homogeneity of the groups and whether the groups had similar or equal knowledge and skill. Complete results of the familiar topic group, unfamiliar topic group can be seen on Table 3 that the mean score of the familiar topic group groups was 66.4, unfamiliar topic group was 67.77. The summary of the pre-test results is available in Table 3.

Table 3.

The Descriptive Statistics Analysis of the Pre-Test in the Two Groups

Group Statistics					
		Std. Error			
	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean
Score	Familiar topic	30	66.4000	3.64455	.66540
	Unfamiliar topic	30	67.7667	3.92765	.71709

The results of the post-test in the familiar topic group are captured in this section. A short look of the results is provided in Table 4. It can be seen that the mean has increased on the post test.

Table 4.

The Descriptive Statistics Analysis of the Post-Test in the Two Groups

Group Statistics					
		Std. Error			
	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean
Score	Familiar topic	30	81.9000	4.19647	.76617
	Unfamiliar topic	30	76.7667	4.28054	.78152

The Levene's testing was employed to test homogeneity of the learners' ability and the collected data in this study. It was aimed at establishing that the learners' entrance behaviour and the data from the two groups namely the control and the experimental groups were similar or equal. Levene's test indicated that the variances were equal between groups ($p = .925 > .05$). Thus, the assumption of homogeneity of variance was met (Table 5).

Table 5.

The Result of Homogeneity Testing

Test of Homogeneity of Variances

Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
.009	1	58	.925

The results of the normality testing using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test in Table 6 showed that all data were normally distributed ($.200 > .05$) (Table 6).

Table 6.

The Result of Normality Testing

	Tests of Normality					
	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Familiar topic group	.075	30	.200*	.990	30	.989
Unfamiliar topic group	.071	30	.200*	.994	30	1.000

*. This is a lower bound of the true significance.

It can be seen on Table 7, an independent sample t-test revealed a significant difference between groups ($.000 < .05$), indicating that the familiar topic group outperformed the unfamiliar topic group.

Table 7.

Independent Sample t-test

		Independent Samples Test								
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				t-test for Equality of Means				
		Sig.		f	t	sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									lower	upper
core	Equal variances assumed	.009	.925	4.690	8	.000	5.13333	1.09443	.94259	.32407
	Equal variances not assumed			.690	7.977	.000	5.13333	1.09443	.94257	.32409

Discussion

This study aimed to examine the effect of topic familiarity on EFL students' argumentative writing skills. The results showed that learners who wrote on topics they were familiar with performed significantly better than those who wrote on less familiar topics. This finding provides a clear answer to the research question and indicates that topic familiarity is a contributing factor in the development of argumentative writing skills in EFL learners.

From a cognitive perspective, these findings can be explained through schema theory, which states that knowledge is stored in organized cognitive structures and can be activated when individuals face specific tasks. In the context of writing, familiar topics allow students to access prior knowledge, experiences, and relevant perspectives more easily. This helps them allocate cognitive resources to constructing arguments, selecting appropriate language forms, and maintaining coherence, rather than expending excessive energy searching for or constructing ideas (Siekman et al., 2022). This explanation aligns with the concept of content knowledge proposed by Jang (2024), which emphasizes that writing success is determined not only by mastery of linguistic aspects but also by the writer's understanding of the topic being discussed. In argumentative writing, understanding the topic becomes even more crucial because writers are required to formulate claims, present evidence, and provide logical justification for their positions.

The findings of this study also reinforce previous research showing a positive effect of topic familiarity on language performance. Indah (2017), for example, found that topic familiarity positively contributed to the writing and critical thinking skills of EFL learners in Indonesia. Similar results were also reported by Pornour (2014), who showed that students achieved higher writing scores when given topics with which they were already

familiar. This study complements these findings by showing that the benefits of topic familiarity are not only evident in general writing performance, but also in argumentative writing, which requires higher-order thinking processes and more complex reasoning. Unlike previous research that focused more on speaking skills or narrative writing, this study provides evidence that topic familiarity helps students develop arguments and elaborate ideas more effectively in argumentative essays.

Yuli & Halimi (2020) state that there are several possible explanations for why familiar topics result in better writing performance. First, topic familiarity can reduce students' cognitive load because they already possess relevant background knowledge. This allows them to focus more on organizing and developing ideas rather than searching for information to write about. Second, familiar topics tend to increase students' motivation and confidence because they feel more comfortable discussing issues they already understand. Third, a sufficient understanding of the topic allows students to generate richer examples, reasons, and supporting evidence, resulting in stronger arguments and more coherent writing. This explanation supports previous research showing that topic familiarity contributes to improving the quality and quantity of ideas generated during the writing process.

Overall, the results of this study indicate that topic familiarity is a significant factor influencing EFL learners' argumentative writing performance. By activating relevant background knowledge and reducing cognitive demands during the writing process, familiar topics enable students to generate ideas more effectively, develop stronger arguments, and produce higher-quality argumentative writing.

CONCLUSION

Giving familiar topics has a significant effect on EFL learners' argumentative writing. Based on the study findings, it can be inferred that guiding learners in writing is unlikely to be effective when they are unable to generate and develop ideas into a composition. Learners require implicit or unconscious preparation to produce ideas, which implies that familiarity with the topic is essential. It will be more significant when the teachers become more active in guiding the learners and more selective in providing the topics to be used in the writing classrooms that are suitable to the learning objectives, the learners' need and interest to make the learners improve their writing performance. Next, the teachers should be able to choose the topics that contain some issues which are appropriate for learners' level and age.

Some suggestions are recommended for the future researchers who consider to conduct the research in the same area with the findings of this study. First, it was stated previously that the subjects of this study are limited to the English Education Department

setting. This study could be replicated with the English Literature Department and English for Specific Purpose students so that the effects of topic familiarity on EFL learners' written performance could be further validated. It is also suggested for future researchers to conduct other research by taking different levels of students in the English Education Department to see whether the strategy can be implemented effectively or not. The next researchers could also replicate with different types of writing such as narrative, descriptive, expository, and persuasive essay since this research is only limited to argumentative essays. Lastly, the other researchers could conduct research and development by developing a new strategy of topic familiarity for teaching writing and other language skills to find the effective strategy for language teaching, especially in teaching argumentative essays.

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