



# A CORPUS-BASED INVESTIGATION OF MOVES IN ARGUMENT STAGE OF ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY

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## ABSTRACT

*Genre analysis has been frequently employed in Malaysia to analyse undergraduate and postgraduate target discourse, particularly research articles and abstracts. On the other hand, just a few studies have been done on argumentative essays written by pre-university students taking the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). The goal of this study is to examine rhetorical moves of the argument stage in 60 argumentative essays. The major instrument utilised to assess the rhetorical structure in the assembled essays was a compiled representative corpus of argumentative essays, COMWARÉ. The identification of rhetorical moves was investigated using BCU approach, which is aided by a computer-assisted corpus analysis (CACA). In addition, two subject matter experts were interviewed in order to gain insider perspectives. The analysis reveals that the argument stage in argumentative essays consists of three moves and five steps. The findings of the study lend itself to providing a representative template of rhetorical organisation for organising argument stage in producing an argumentative essay. Pedagogically, this rhetorical structure is useful particularly to novice writers to better understand how argument stage is produced.*

**KEYWORDS:** Rhetorical Moves; Genre Analysis; Malaysian University English Test (MUET); Argumentative Essay; Computer-Assisted Corpus Analysis (CACA)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Writing is regarded as one of the most difficult skills for both English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as Foreign Language (EFL) students to master (David, Thang, & Azman, 2015; Habibi & Singh, 2019; Hirvela, 2017; Kanestion, Singh, Shamsudin, 2017; Rahmanita & Cahyono, 2018). This is because non-native speakers' written talents are learnt and practised via experience, rather than being innate (Grape and Kaplan, 1999). To be able to grasp and generate a decent degree of writing proficiency, linguistic competence alone is insufficient; second language writers must additionally examine the rhetorical structure of a document. According to Bhatia (1993), rhetorical structure appears in the macro-organization of writing, which encompasses a few levels of information organisation. In summary, rhetorical structure is a formal structure of a text that is acknowledged or known by its discourse community.

Kaplan (1966) developed the notion of contrastive rhetoric, which claims that writing is a mirror of cultural thought processes, recognising that the structural rhetorical organisation of a text varies by language and culture. Contrastive rhetoricians are interested in deciphering and analysing the rhetorical structure of written discourse in both L1 and L2. Academics respond to criticism by claiming that it simply provides a better understanding of cultural differences (Matsuda, 1997; Connor & A. Mauranen, 1999). Though there are many studies on contrastive rhetoric, especially in the ESL context, Reza and Atena (2013) claimed that the need for students to learn the rhetorical structure persists, and it is noteworthy that knowing the rhetorical structure in English and other languages or cultures will likely only help learners understand the differences and similarities that exist. In Malaysia, for example, contrastive rhetoric has yet to develop a structure that can be used as a foundation in ESL writing instruction.



Since the introduction of Swales' (1990) Create A Research Space (CARS) model, there has been a growing interest in analysing various types of texts in the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), including academic and professional texts, namely grant proposals (Connor & Mauranen, 1999; Cotos, 2019), job advertisements (Bhatia, 1993), application letters (Henry & Roseberry, 2001), letters of appeal (Sadeghi & Samuel, 2013), EAP classroom lessons (Lee, 2016), research articles (RA) in various disciplines (Davis, 2015; Fazilatfar & Naseri, 2014; Maswana et al., 2015), three minutes thesis presentation (Hu & Liu, 2018); engineering work procedures (Singh, 2014) and sub-genres such as introductions in RAs (Maher & Milligan, 2019; Ina, Aizan, & Noor Hashima, 2015), abstracts (Nguyen, 2018; Tseng, 2011), theoretical framework sections (Tseng, 2018), and discussions (Amnuai & Wannaruk, 2012; Holmes, 1997; Moreno & Swales, 2018). As is usual in the field of genre analysis, researchers in these studies concentrated on the examination of the rhetorical structure of distinct works. As a result, such studies have aided inexperienced writers in academic and professional settings in adopting the rhetorical structure of the target genres.

As with other varieties of academic writing (theses, research papers, proposals, and problem statements), the argumentative essay is regarded a distinct genre due to the fact that it follows a widely established rhetorical framework. While Swales (1990) introduced the concept of rhetorical structure by examining the rhetorical structure of research articles' introductions, which consists of several moves and steps, in the same era, Hyland (1990) proposed an analytical model of an argumentative essay using 65 essays written by sampled non-native speakers, which consists of three stages and several moves. To the authors' knowledge, however, there have been few research utilising Hyland's analytical framework (1990) in the field of genre analysis, which could be a result of the model's development process. For instance, Liu (2015) has conducted research on the moves and quality of wrap-up sentences in essay conclusions while exploring the impact of L1 rhetorical transfer at the text level. The findings reveal that Affirmation move, which is an optional move in English essays, has been greatly employed by the students due to their inductive style of writing, a typical Chinese rhetorical mode, while Consolidation move is underused in Chinese essays. Albeit, the findings highlight L1 rhetorical transfer with some novel approaches, but no attempt is made to develop an analytical framework for argumentative essays that may be extensively used in teaching and learning in ESL/EFL classrooms. The moves are selected manually, which contradicts the current study's methodology, as the researchers employ computer-assisted corpus analysis, or CACA, (Singh,

2014), and to eliminate subjectivity in the detected moves, validation and reliability tests are conducted.

Due to its limitations, Swalesian move analysis is used to further examine and refine the rhetorical structure in argumentative writing. A move is defined as a unit that acts within a section of text and directly contributes to the text's overall purpose. When writers apply a step or a group of steps, the purposes of the moves are achieved (Bhatia, 1993). This is demonstrated in Chandrasegaran's (2008) work, which examines argument techniques, specifically stance assertion moves, stance support moves, and rhetorical use of topic knowledge, in two types of discourse: online informal forum and formal academic essay. Nonetheless, the study overlooked the holistic aspect of argumentative writing in educational settings when communicative goals must be met formally.

According to the aforementioned studies, the majority of attention has been focused on academic writing and professional settings, while argumentative writing among pre-university students continues to be a neglected topic, particularly in Malaysia. As a result, the current study conducts move analysis utilising Swales' (1990) model and Hyland's (1990) analytical framework as a guide, with the intention of employing them as a framework for developing teaching and learning materials. As with other studies that evaluate a single part of a genre, or what is referred to as a sub-genre, such as the introduction, problem statement, discussion, and conclusion, this study examines the argument stage of argumentative essays produced by sampled pre-university students.

## 2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions were framed to guide the study.

- i) What are the rhetorical moves in the argument stage of the sampled argumentative essays produced by the pre-university students?
- ii) What are the frequencies of the rhetorical moves used in the argument stage of argumentative essays produced by the pre-university students?

## 3. METHODOLOGY

Pre-university students from two pre-university colleges in Perlis and Kedah participated in this study. Pre-university colleges were chosen because students would be required to sit for the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) annually. MUET is a competency test that is regularly administered throughout the country prior to entering university education. At the pre-university level, pupils are required to take the test because it is a requirement for university admission.

Prior to the actual MUET, pre-university students were assigned previous year questions and

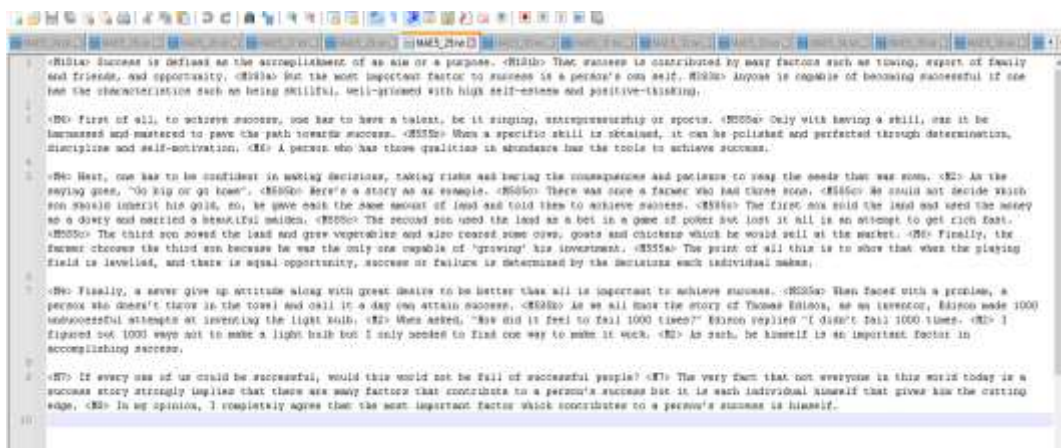


instructed to compose argumentative essays in class. Two raters with over ten years of experience teaching and grading independently scored the essays. The reliability between raters was 0.79. The purpose of this study was to compile a genre-specific corpus using a purposive sampling method; thus, a total of 60 argumentative essays composed by pre-university students in respective colleges in Malaysia were selected and compiled as a representative learner corpus, Corpus of MUET Writing Argumentative Essays (COMWARe). Following Kanoksilapatham's (2015) work, the corpus size is adequate to be representative of the target genre.

Swales' (1990) CARs model, in conjunction with Hyland's (1990), was utilised to aid the researchers in identifying the motions and steps used in the argumentative essays in this analysis. According to his analysis, there are three steps involved in writing a research article's beginning. Thus, in order to meet the study's aims, the researchers focused on the introduction paragraph or the first step of an argumentative essay, referred to as Thesis in Hyland's (1990) analytical framework. Swales' (1990) model was chosen because it is comprehensive and widely utilised as a foundation

for study across multiple fields and genres. On the other hand, Hyland's (1990) framework was used to supplement the analysis process because it was established with the help of second language learners (L2) in a second language situation similar to Malaysia. However, few research have used this paradigm in conjunction with genre analysis, most likely due to its reliability.

The written texts of the pupils were converted to plain text and saved in a new folder. The researchers then assigned a code to each written text, such as MAE4 1, which relates to student No. 1's MUET Band 4 argumentative essay. These documents were then re-saved in Notepad++ 7.9.1, a free online software, in order to manually tag the movements in the written texts. A move coding scheme was established using the Biber, Connor, and Upton (BCU) approach (Upton & Cohen, 2009) as a guide, and the corpus was manually move-tagged (Figure 1). Following that, AntConc version 3.4.3w (2014) was used to calculate the move frequencies in the gathered argumentative writings. To prevent word count errors, each move was enclosed in angle brackets <>.



**Figure 1: Manually tagged move in Notepad++ 6.9.2**

The objectivity of the analysis was preserved by having two coders identify the moves in the argument stage. Unlike Hyland's (1990) approach, we chose the inter-coder reliability assessment as the best technique and calculated the agreement between the coders using Cohen's Kappa (k). To assess the coding's reliability, two English lecturers pursuing a PhD in Applied Linguistics were initially trained on all aspects of the moves. The coders were then given 30 out of 60 samples to evaluate and code using the coding system developed by the study's researcher, utilising the BCU method. If there were disagreements about how to differentiate a specific move in a sentence, both the coder and the researchers would talk and agree on a solution. Numerous arguments were placed on the researcher's proposed move coding scheme. Given the Cohen's

kappa score of .81, the degree of agreement was at very good (Landis & Koch, 1977). As a result, the coding method was deemed reliable and valid for extensive usage in this investigation.

Finally, a semi-structured interview was conducted to elicit insider viewpoints on the writing strategies adopted by the sampled pre-university students. This interview session included two subject matter experts (SMEs) with more than two decades of teaching experience.

#### 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

While move analysis has been widely used to analyse academic writing at the tertiary level in order to help students improve their writing skills (Cotos et al., 2015; Suryani et al., 2013), the researcher in this study believes that the use of move analysis has



benefited the investigation of how pre-university students structure their written argumentative texts.

### Research Question 1

In response to the first research question, the following moves were identified in pre-university students' argumentative essays using BCU approach.

**Table 1. Proposed moves in the argument stage of argumentative essays**

Stage	Move	Steps
Argument	Move 4: Establishing topic sentence	
	Move 5: Justifying the main idea	5a. Providing the reason(s) 5b. Providing specific examples, evidences, facts or analogy 5c. Illustrating and analysing the examples, evidences, facts or analogy 5d. Showing comparison 5e. Showing the impact
	Move 6: Drawing conclusion	

The argument stage is the most important component of an argumentative essay. As can be seen in Table 1, the argument stage involves three steps. Move 4: Establishing the topic sentence is the first step. The primary idea of a body paragraph is introduced by a topic sentence, which should be related to the thesis statement. Hyland (1990) drew attention to a similar strategy known as Marker and Restatement. These two actions, he claimed, essentially mark the presentation of a claim and the rebuttal of the notion. Miller & Pessoa's (2016) hyper-Theme identified a similar move in which the higher scored essays employed topic sentences when composing their essays.

The essential step in the argument stage is Move 5: Justifying the main idea. This move serves to expand and develop the preceding move's key notion. To show further, the idea is expanded in five steps, namely <M5S5a> Providing the reason(s), which focuses on answering the question "why" so that the writers can reason out; <M5S5b> Providing specific examples, evidence, or analogy to support the reason and main idea, as well as to answer the question "how"; <M5S5c> Illustrating examples, evidences, facts, or analogies is an explanation of the

examples, evidences, facts, or analogies that connects them to support the main point; making comparisons to support the main point is the aim of <M5S5d> which is Showing comparison; and <M5S5e> Showing the impact emphasises the influence of the main idea. All these steps are adapted from Hyland (1990), except for Move 5 step 5d.

Following that, Move 6 Drawing conclusion summarises and supports the key point of the body paragraph. Move 6 rounds up each paragraph with a short summary related to the idea in move 4 and this move is adapted from Tessuto's (2015) work. He highlighted a similar move under the discussion section of research articles. By using this move, the authors evaluate and provide the implications based on the study that they conducted. In a similar way, move 6, which is identified in the present study, is used to summarise the ideas by evaluating each idea and providing its implications.

### Research Question 2

In answering the second research question, frequency analysis was conducted using AntConc 3.4.3w (2014).

**Table 2. Frequency of moves 4, 5 and 6 in COMWArE**

Move	M4	M5S5a	M5S5b	M5S5c	M5S5d	M5S5e	M6	Total
MAE4	67	122	124	30	2	9	46	287
MAE5	66	147	167	22	18	26	56	380
MAE6	65	152	155	38	15	18	60	378
Total	198	421	446	90	35	63	162	1045

As shown in Table 2, the total number of move 4 appearing in the COMWArE corpus is 198 hits. MAE4 has the most occurrences with 67 hits. This is followed by MAE5 with a total of 66

occurrences. Meanwhile, MAE6 recorded the least as it appears 65 times. This move has appeared to be an obligatory strategy as the frequency of occurrences is 100% (Kanoksilapatham, 2005, 2015). According to



SME 1, this move is an obligatory strategy as pre-university students are taught on the importance of having topic sentences in each body paragraph. On the other hand, SME 2 said that the students will have a focus in developing the paragraphs. Without a topic sentence, the body paragraphs will be vague and has unclear direction.

The biggest number of occurrences among all the moves is move 5 step 5b, which has 446 occurrences followed by M5S5a, which has 421 occurrences. To be specific, MAE5 had the most occurrences for move 5 step 5b, with 167. MAE6 comes in second with 155 hits, while MAE4 comes in last with 124 hits. M5S5b appears to be a mandatory strategy because it appeared in 60 (100%) of the files, whereas M5S5a appears to be a conventional move because the frequency of occurrences is greater than 60%. Students must justify how the idea is relevant and important, according to SME 1. Move 5 step 5b is employed as an obligation because students must justify how the idea is relevant and important. SME 2, on the other hand, stated that students back up their arguments with examples that demonstrate how each notion is related to the debated topic.

M5S5d, on the other hand, has the fewest occurrences (35), while M5S5c and M5S5e have 90 and 63, respectively. These three steps are optional, as they were only found in about 60% of the files. When asked why move 5 step 5d is only used optionally in essays, SME 1 replied, "It depends on the essay question...they will use this method if they need to make a comparison". SME 2 stated that it is nature of the question necessitates it.

MAE6 has the most occurrences with 60, followed by MAE5 with 56. MAE4 had the fewest occurrences, with 46 hits. This appears to be a common strategy, as the number of occurrences exceeds 60%. Both SME 1 and SME 2 claimed they taught students this method such that each body paragraph ends with a mini-conclusion before going on to the following paragraph.

## 5. CONCLUSION

By and large, the analyses reveal that having such rhetorical structure reflects the systematic structure of the argument stage which sequentially provides a comprehensive outline of information to the readers, who are the examiners (San & Tan, 2012). Nonetheless, based on the data in Table 2, it's worth noting that there are some variances within each band. To accomplish their communicative goals, above satisfactory writers employ the majority of the moves and steps. In order to achieve its communicative purpose, are found to use most of the moves and steps. It can be deduced that, move 4, move 5 step 5b and move 6 are obligatory.

It is obvious that pre-university students should be aware of the structure of argumentative

essays, particularly the rhetorical structure in the band 4, 5, and 6 argument stage, as the majority of them struggled to create and develop ideas in MUET (Ka-kan-dee & Kaur, 2015; Yunus & Chien, 2016). As a result, familiarity with rhetorical structure as a framework can aid students in generating effective argument stages. Similarly, because this framework is descriptive in nature, it may also be used as a scaffolding tool to assist students in developing their own piece of writing, as it provides a platform for students to identify their own shortcomings and strengths. This is consistent with the findings of Ka-kan-dee & Kaur (2015) and Kanestion et al., (2017), who assert that genre-based training enables students to develop writing abilities through exposure to the genre's fundamental linguistic items.

However, other subgenres of argumentative writing, such as introduction and conclusion, were not fully examined in this study. Future research could apply move analysis to examine the introduction and conclusion stages, and also complete an important component in BCU approach, which is the linguistic analysis.

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