

# Argumentative discourse construction through the AREL framework in EFL university classrooms: A qualitative study

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## ABSTRACT

This study addresses the challenges faced by EFL university students in constructing coherent and logical spoken arguments in academic contexts. Despite the increasing emphasis on argumentative speaking in higher education, many learners struggle to organize ideas and provide sufficient justification during real-time communication. This study aims to explore how Indonesian EFL university students construct argumentative discourse using the AREL (Assertion, Reason, Evidence, Linkback) framework, identify the challenges they encounter, and examine their perceptions of its usefulness. A qualitative research design was employed involving five university students who participated in an argumentative speaking task followed by semi-structured interviews. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that students were able to use the AREL framework to structure their arguments more coherently; however, they experienced difficulties in generating relevant evidence, maintaining fluency, and managing cognitive load during spontaneous speaking. Despite these challenges, students perceived AREL as an effective framework that improved clarity and logical organization of their spoken arguments. These findings suggest that AREL can serve as a valuable pedagogical tool to support argumentative speaking development in EFL higher education contexts.



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In EFL university classrooms, students are frequently encouraged to voice opinions on complex and debatable issues; however, the ability to speak fluently does not necessarily translate into the ability to construct logically sound and persuasive arguments. In academic contexts, weak oral argumentation may

limit students' capacity to articulate positions critically, participate in scholarly discussions, and engage in higher-order thinking activities expected in tertiary education (Lin, 2024).

Although argumentative speaking is increasingly emphasized in EFL higher education, many students continue to experience difficulties in organizing spoken arguments in a coherent and logical manner. Previous research indicates that EFL learners often prioritize linguistic accuracy and fluency over the systematic development of reasoning, justification, and conclusion during oral communication (Elisathusilawani, 2023). As a result, spoken arguments may appear fragmented, unsupported, or rhetorically ineffective, particularly in real-time speaking situations that demand spontaneous responses (Szyszka et al., 2024).

This challenge highlights the need for instructional approaches that support not only linguistic competence but also argumentative discourse construction in oral communication. Studies in EFL pedagogy suggest that structured speaking tasks and argumentation-oriented instruction can facilitate students' critical engagement and organization of ideas during speaking activities (X. Yin et al., 2024). However, the extent to which such instructional support is perceived as practical and usable by learners themselves remains underexplored.

Despite the increasing incorporation of argumentation-based activities in EFL speaking instruction, students often struggle to apply argumentative structures naturally in spontaneous oral production. They report difficulties in developing relevant reasons, providing appropriate evidence, and maintaining coherence under time constraints, which may reduce their confidence and willingness to participate in speaking tasks (Alamri & Qasem, 2024; Andania et al., 2024).

These challenges highlight the importance of examining students' perceptions of instructional frameworks, as learners' attitudes, perceived usefulness, and ease of use can influence their engagement and learning outcomes (Darwin et al., 2024). However, existing research on argumentative speaking continues to focus primarily on performance outcomes, with limited attention to learners' subjective experiences during the process of constructing spoken arguments.

Existing research on argumentation in EFL contexts has predominantly focused on instructional effectiveness, critical thinking development, or measurable improvements in speaking performance (Majidi et al., 2021). While these studies provide valuable pedagogical insights, they offer limited understanding of how learners themselves perceive the use of argumentation frameworks during real-time speaking.

Moreover, few qualitative studies have explored how EFL university students experience the use of structured frameworks in organizing ideas, managing cognitive demands, and maintaining coherence while speaking argumentatively. This gap suggests the need for learner-centered qualitative

research that foregrounds students' voices in examining argumentative discourse construction in EFL speaking contexts (S. Yin et al., 2024).

One instructional framework that has been increasingly used to support argumentative discourse is the AREL framework, which provides a structured approach to organizing arguments and has been applied in EFL speaking contexts.

This study contributes to the literature by foregrounding students' perceptions in examining the use of the AREL framework in real-time argumentative speaking, an area that remains underexplored in previous EFL research. Unlike prior studies that primarily focus on performance outcomes or instructional effectiveness, this study highlights how learners cognitively experience and adapt the framework during spontaneous oral communication, thereby providing deeper insights into its practicality and pedagogical relevance.

The present study argues that the value of the AREL framework in EFL argumentative speaking extends beyond its structured design to include students' perceptions of its practicality, clarity, and relevance in real-time speaking situations. By examining learners' experiences, this research positions AREL as both a cognitive and organizational framework that shapes how students plan, articulate, and reflect on spoken arguments, rather than merely as a technique for improving speaking performance.

This study is guided by three research questions addressing students' use and experience of the AREL framework in EFL argumentative speaking. First, it examines how Indonesian EFL university students construct argumentative discourse using the AREL framework during speaking activities. Second, it explores the challenges students encounter when applying the AREL framework in argumentative speaking contexts. Third, it investigates how the AREL framework supports students in organizing ideas and delivering clearer and more logical spoken arguments.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the growing body of research on argumentative discourse and speaking pedagogy in EFL contexts by emphasizing learners' perceptions as a key dimension in evaluating instructional frameworks. Pedagogically, the findings may inform lecturers' decisions in selecting and adapting argumentation frameworks that align with students' cognitive and communicative needs in higher education settings (Tsai, 2025).

## **METHOD**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how Indonesian EFL university students construct argumentative discourse using the AREL framework, the challenges they encounter, and their perceptions of its usefulness in speaking activities. A qualitative approach is appropriate when the research aims to understand participants' experiences, perceptions, and meaning-making processes in depth rather than to measure variables numerically (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By prioritizing

participants' voices, this design allowed the researcher to capture nuanced insights into how the AREL framework is applied in real-time argumentative speaking contexts.

The study was conducted in an EFL university classroom in Indonesia, where argumentative speaking activities are integrated into speaking courses. In this context, students are required to express opinions on debatable academic and social issues. The AREL framework was introduced as a guiding structure to support students in organizing their spoken arguments through assertion, reasoning, evidence, and linkback.

## **Instruments and Procedures**

### ***Participants***

The participants consisted of five Indonesian EFL university students selected through purposive sampling. Although the number of participants was limited, it is considered sufficient for an in-depth qualitative exploration focusing on detailed analysis rather than generalization. This sampling technique is commonly used in qualitative research to identify individuals who can provide rich and relevant information related to the research focus (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The selected participants had prior experience using the AREL framework in argumentative speaking activities, which enabled them to reflect meaningfully on the process and challenges of applying the framework. To ensure ethical considerations, pseudonyms were used to maintain participants' anonymity.

### ***Instruments***

Two main instruments were employed in this study: a speaking task and semi-structured interviews.

#### **1. Speaking Task**

The primary instrument was an argumentative speaking task on the topic: "Should university students be allowed to use smartphones during lectures?" This topic was selected due to its relevance and familiarity to students, allowing them to express opinions naturally. Participants were instructed to construct their arguments using the AREL framework during the task. Participants were given time to prepare briefly before delivering their arguments, and their performances were audio-recorded for analysis.

#### **2. Semi-Structured Interview**

To further explore students' experiences, semi-structured interviews were conducted after the speaking activity. This instrument allowed flexibility for participants to elaborate on their responses while still addressing key research concerns (Dörnyei, 2007). The interviews focused on three main aspects: (1) how students constructed arguments using AREL, (2) challenges encountered during speaking, and (3) perceived benefits of the framework. Each

interview lasted approximately 10–15 minutes and was audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

### **Procedure**

The procedure of the study was conducted in several stages. First, participants were introduced to the AREL framework and its components. Second, they were given time to prepare and then participated in the argumentative speaking task using the given topic. Third, semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture their reflections and experiences. All data were audio-recorded and collected in a language that was comfortable for the participants to ensure clarity and depth of responses.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis followed several steps, including data familiarization, coding, categorization, and theme development (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, the researcher transcribed the speaking performances and interview data. Second, the data were coded based on the components of the AREL framework (Assertion, Reason, Evidence, and Linkback) as well as emerging patterns related to challenges and perceptions. Third, the codes were grouped into broader themes aligned with the research questions. Finally, the themes were interpreted to provide meaningful insights into students' argumentative discourse construction and experiences.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, the researcher conducted careful data checking and maintained consistency in the coding process. To enhance credibility, data triangulation was applied by comparing findings from speaking performances and interview data.

### **FINDINGS**

The findings of this study are presented based on the three research questions, focusing on (1) how students construct argumentative discourse using the AREL framework, (2) challenges encountered during its application, and (3) students' perceptions of its usefulness in argumentative speaking. The data were derived from students' speaking performances and semi-structured interviews and are organized into three main themes.

#### ***Students' Construction of Argumentative Discourse Using AREL***

The findings indicate that students were able to construct argumentative discourse more systematically when using the AREL framework. However, the completeness and quality of each component varied across participants.

As shown in Table 1, the majority of participants demonstrated strong performance in Assertion and Reason, while Evidence and Linkback were less consistently applied.

Table 1 Students' Use of AREL Components in Speaking Task

Participant	Assertion	Reason	Evidence	Linkback	Notes
P1	✓	✓	✓	✓	Complete structure
P2	✓	✓	✓	✗	Weak linkback
P3	✓	✓	△	✗	Limited evidence
P4	✓	△	✗	✗	Simplified argument
P5	✓	✓	△	△	Partial structure

Note: ✓ = clearly demonstrated; △ = partially demonstrated; ✗ = not demonstrated.

Analysis of the speaking task reveals that most students were able to produce clear assertions and basic reasoning. For example, Participant 1 stated:

*"I do believe that university students shouldn't be allowed to use smartphone... because it is going to distract them..."*

This statement reflects a clear **Assertion**, followed by a **Reason** explaining the negative impact of smartphone use. The participant further elaborated:

*"Let's take look like at an example... a lot of students they play phone while class..."*

This part represents the **Evidence**, as the participant provided a real-life example to support the argument. Finally, the participant concluded:

*"So, I do believe that university students are not allowed to use their phones..."*

This indicates the use of **Linkback**, reinforcing the main claim. This example demonstrates a relatively complete use of the AREL framework.

Similarly, Participant 2 showed a structured argument:

*"University students are allowed to use smartphone... because they already being an adult..."*

This reflects an **Assertion** and **Reason**, followed by:

*"For example, in Q&A session... we can use phone to search something..."*

This represents **Evidence**. However, the linkage between ideas was less explicitly emphasized, indicating partial use of the Linkback component.

Similarly, Participant 4 produced a simplified argument structure:

*“Yes... smartphone is really relevant during lecture... we can find journal or article...”*

This response reflects an Assertion with limited Reason, but lacks clearly developed Evidence and Linkback. This suggests that the participant relied on general statements rather than structured argumentation. This variation highlights different levels of students' ability in applying the AREL framework during speaking.

Overall, while students demonstrated an understanding of the AREL structure, the Evidence and Linkback components were not consistently developed, suggesting incomplete argumentative construction in some cases. These findings indicate that while students are able to follow the AREL structure, challenges remain in applying all components consistently during real-time speaking. These findings address the first research question by demonstrating how students construct argumentative discourse using the AREL framework in speaking tasks.

### ***Challenges in Applying the AREL Framework***

This section addresses the second research question by examining the challenges students encountered when applying the AREL framework. The findings reveal that students experienced several challenges when applying the AREL framework in real-time speaking. One of the most prominent difficulties was generating appropriate evidence spontaneously. This is evident in both the interview data and speaking performance.

For instance, although Participant 3 provided reasoning about smartphone use, the evidence relied primarily on general experience rather than specific or verifiable examples:

*“In my experience as university student, I used smartphone to search unfamiliar terms...”*

This indicates that while students attempt to include Evidence, it often lacks depth and specificity, supporting their interview responses that generating evidence is challenging.

Another challenge relates to maintaining fluency while following the structure. As reflected in the interview data, students reported that thinking about AREL components during speaking sometimes disrupted their flow. This is also visible in the speaking task, where some participants produced repetitive or less fluent expressions while organizing their arguments.

Additionally, anxiety and time constraints affected students' performance. For example, Participant 4's response showed a simplified structure with limited development of reasoning and evidence, suggesting cognitive overload during spontaneous speaking.

### ***Students' Perceptions of the AREL Framework***

This section addresses the third research question by exploring students' perceptions of the AREL framework in argumentative speaking. Despite the challenges, students generally perceived the AREL framework positively. Interview data indicate that students found AREL helpful in organizing ideas and making their arguments more structured.

This perception is supported by improvements observed in the speaking task. Compared to unstructured speaking, students were able to present clearer argument flow, even if some components were not fully developed. For example, Participant 5 demonstrated awareness of structure:

*"I believe that university students are allowed to use smartphones... it can help us to access learning resources..."*

This reflects a clear attempt to follow Assertion and Reason, even though the Evidence component was less elaborated.

Overall, the findings suggest that AREL functions as both a structural and cognitive support tool. While students may not fully master all components, the framework enhances their ability to produce more organized and logical spoken arguments.

## **DISCUSSION**

### ***The Role of AREL in Supporting Argumentative Discourse Construction***

The findings indicate that the AREL framework plays a significant role in supporting students' ability to construct more organized and logical argumentative discourse in EFL speaking contexts. The consistent use of assertion and reasoning among participants suggests that structured frameworks function as cognitive scaffolds that guide learners in organizing ideas during real-time communication. This aligns with research on self-regulated learning (SRL), which emphasizes that explicit instructional scaffolding, such as guiding learners in planning, monitoring, and evaluating their performance, enhances both language learning outcomes and learner autonomy (Sari et al., 2026).

From this perspective, AREL can be interpreted not merely as a structural tool but as a form of externally mediated regulation that gradually supports learners in internalizing argumentative thinking processes. Similar to structured SRL instruction, the effectiveness of AREL depends on how consistently it is practiced and integrated into classroom routines. As shown in SRL literature, structured and

explicit instructional strategies are most effective when they are accompanied by guided reflection and sustained teacher support (Sari et al., 2026) .

However, the findings also reveal that students' use of evidence and linkback remains limited. This suggests that while AREL provides a clear structural pathway, it does not automatically ensure depth of argumentation. This issue may be related to learners' limited cognitive resources and insufficient exposure to meaningful input, particularly in generating relevant supporting details. In line with material development research, effective learning outcomes depend not only on structure but also on the relevance and richness of instructional input and practice opportunities (Sari, 2019) . Therefore, the pedagogical value of AREL should be understood as contingent upon the quality of instructional design and task support.

### ***Cognitive and Linguistic Challenges in Real-Time Argumentative Speaking***

The study highlights several cognitive and linguistic challenges faced by students when applying the AREL framework during spontaneous speaking. Students reported difficulty in generating relevant evidence, maintaining fluency, and managing multiple cognitive demands simultaneously. These findings can be interpreted through the lens of SRL and cognitive processing, where learners must coordinate planning, monitoring, and linguistic production in real time (Sari et al., 2026) .

Moreover, the tension between structure and fluency observed in this study reflects the complexity of language learning as an experiential and developmental process. As illustrated in autoethnographic research, language acquisition involves gradual development through repeated exposure, practice, and reflection, rather than immediate mastery of structured forms (Sari, 2025) . This suggests that students' difficulty in applying AREL fluently may stem from their ongoing process of internalizing both linguistic knowledge and cognitive strategies.

Additionally, learners' challenges in maintaining fluency while adhering to structure may also be linked to affective factors such as anxiety and cognitive overload. When learners focus excessively on following a framework, their attention to linguistic production may be disrupted, leading to reduced fluency. This phenomenon highlights the need for gradual scaffolding, where structured frameworks like AREL are introduced progressively to avoid overwhelming learners.

Interestingly, similar patterns have been observed in technology-enhanced learning environments. For instance, AI-based tools such as Text-to-Speech (TTS) provide immediate feedback and support fluency development, but they may also introduce new cognitive demands when learners attempt to interpret and apply feedback simultaneously (Putra et al., 2025) . This parallel suggests that both instructional frameworks and technological tools require careful pedagogical integration to balance cognitive load and learning effectiveness.

### ***Students' Perceptions and the Pedagogical Value of AREL***

Another important finding of this study is the generally positive perception of students toward the AREL framework. Participants reported that AREL helped them organize ideas more clearly, improve logical flow, and increase confidence in speaking. This positive perception aligns with research indicating that learner engagement and motivation are strongly influenced by the perceived usefulness and clarity of instructional tools (Putra et al., 2025).

From a pedagogical perspective, AREL can be viewed as a metacognitive tool that enhances learners' awareness of how arguments are constructed. This aligns with SRL theory, which emphasizes the importance of metacognitive awareness in enabling learners to regulate their own learning processes (Sari et al., 2026). By explicitly guiding learners through stages of argument construction, AREL supports not only performance but also reflective thinking.

However, some students perceived the framework as rigid and challenging to apply in spontaneous contexts. This finding suggests that the success of AREL depends on how it is introduced and practiced. In line with instructional material development principles, learning tools must be adapted to learners' needs, proficiency levels, and learning contexts to ensure engagement and effectiveness (Sari, 2019).

Furthermore, learners' positive perceptions should not be interpreted as evidence of full mastery. Instead, they indicate an initial stage of acceptance and adaptation, which requires continued practice and reinforcement. As shown in experiential learning accounts, sustained engagement, repetition, and meaningful practice are essential for transforming structured knowledge into fluent language use (Sari, 2025).

Overall, the findings reinforce the importance of integrating structured frameworks like AREL with learner-centered pedagogical approaches that emphasize gradual scaffolding, reflective practice, and contextual relevance. By combining structural guidance with opportunities for meaningful use, educators can enhance both the effectiveness and sustainability of argumentative speaking instruction.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrates that the AREL framework provides a useful structure for supporting EFL university students in constructing more organized and logical argumentative discourse in speaking activities. The findings show that students were able to use the framework to formulate clear assertions and basic reasoning; however, they still encountered difficulties in developing strong evidence and maintaining coherence during real-time communication.

The study also reveals that applying the AREL framework in spontaneous speaking involves cognitive and linguistic challenges, particularly in balancing idea organization, fluency, and vocabulary retrieval. Despite these challenges, students generally perceived AREL positively, as it helped them organize their thoughts, improve clarity, and increase confidence in expressing arguments.

These findings suggest that the effectiveness of AREL extends beyond its structural function, as it also serves as a cognitive and metacognitive tool in supporting argumentative speaking. Therefore, its implementation in EFL classrooms should be accompanied by guided practice, gradual familiarization, and supportive learning environments to help students internalize the framework more naturally.

Despite these contributions, this study is limited by the small number of participants and the specific classroom context, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. In terms of implications, this study highlights the importance of integrating argumentation frameworks that align with students' cognitive needs and speaking demands in higher education contexts. Future research is recommended to explore the long-term impact of AREL on students' speaking development, as well as its application in different instructional settings and with larger participant groups.

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