THE COMMON MISTAKES OF UNDERGRADUATE EFL STUDENTS IN WRITING ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAYS

Eko Suhartoyo[1], Dzurriyyatun Ni'mah[2], Febti Ismiatun[3]
Universitas Islam Malang, Department of English Education
Malang, Indonesia
suhartoyoeko@unisma.ac.id,

Abstract

The argumentative essay seems to be challenging for university students (Ka-kan-dee & Kaur, 2015), including in Indonesia. Despite its prominence, this writing genre needs complex thoughts in the process of text making. As an impact, these troubles create hinders so that students show the poor quality in developing the essay. This issue motivated a study that aimed at highlighting the students' mistakes in writing an argumentative essay through a mixed-method approach. The participants were chosen disorderly from university students majoring in English education and engaged in filling out the questionnaires and interviews sequentially. The explanation data analysis was then applied by means of construing the common problems coped with the participants quantitatively as well as qualitative analysis. The results of the analysis remarked that participants encountered numerous complexities in building the argumentative essay, especially low achievers. They revealed that the features of introduction, conclusion, and grammar were so stressful and high demanding to write so they required effective strategies as well as writing digital tools to resolve the challenges. Foreclosing, the last part of this study provides meaningful insight regarding the curricula of teaching argumentative essays, such as materials and instructions.

Keywords: **writing skill, argumentative essay, the students' mistakes**

Introduction

Argumentative essay is the hardest task of any writings for English as Foreign Language (EFL) students around the world, for instance in Thailand (Ka-kan-dee & Kaur, 2015), in China (Bychkovska & Lee, 2017), and in Indonesia as well (Suhartoyo, 2017; Suhartoyo et al., 2015). Indeed, the EFL students are required to compose argumentative essay as their prerequisite before graduating from their home universities. During composing argumentative essay, students need to take several stages to produce a good argumentative essay. In general, there are three procedures of writing namely; before writing, during writing, and after writing. Whereas, (Hedge, 2003) states that a good writing should covers several steps, including planning, drafting, editing, and writing the final version. And a good argumentative essay follows those above-mentioned stages of writing.

Several factors making argumentative essay as the hardest skill among any other writings are first that most of EFL students are lack of practice and experience in L2 writing in order to produce argumentative essay, a required text type in academic discipline (Grabe, 2001 as cited in Altınmakas & Bayyurt, 2019)). The study conducted by Altınmakas & Bayyurt (2019) showed the Turkish students are exposed more on reading rather than in academic writing. The second reason is that writing argumentative essay by the EFL students whose first language is not English might cause double burden (Hyland, 2013). (Hedge, 2003) explained that L2 students often faced grater problems as they

write academic English in which it is different from their first language. The third factor is, for academic tasks, Asian students lack of critical thinking skills especially in essay writing and speaking for debate (Rear, 2017; Suhartoyo, 2017; Suhartoyo et al., 2015). Moreover Elwood (2000) in Rear (2017)revealed that Asian students tend to be passive and non-participatory. Moreover, in Indonesian context, Suhartoyo (2017 and 2015) found that students tend to focus more on mechanics, vocabulary, and grammar rather than in introduction/thesis statement, development, refutation/opposition, and conclusion.

Primarily, an undergraduate EFL students should be able to compose good argumentative essay in which the students add more explicit convincing reasoning evidences in their essay. Fahim & Hashtroodi (2012)added that students at tertiary levels should possess critical thinking competence in which they should add more arguments as well as good reasons in their argumentative essay. The critical competence in argumentative essay is essential to make judgement about opinion the topic being discussed. Moreover, critical thinking competence reflects how good undergraduate EFL students comprehend the topic of discussion. Regarding the importance of critical thinking competence for the undergraduate EFL students, it is best implemented in argumentative essay writing activity.

Several Indonesian universities set the argumentative essay course in the third and fourth semester. Argumentative essay in university of Islam Malang (Unisma) is offered in the third semester. Formally, before taking Writing III course where argumentative essay is given, the undergraduate EFL students should pass the Writing I and Writing II courses. For the information, argumentative essay in Writing III course is not the only material given. The

argumentative essay section is included among any other essays such as chronological order/process essays, cause/effect essays, and comparison/contrast essays. The objective of argumentative essay is to develop students' ability to present logical reasoning, strong and convincing argument, critical analysis, and judgment in the form of subject-related argumentative essay. In practice of 3 credits semester, argumentative essay section is given in 4 out of sixteen meetings.

Some researches dealing with argumentative essays in tertiary levels have been mushrooming issue worldwide, for instance in Iran (Lotfi et al., 2019), in China (Lu & Xie, 2019), and in Indonesia (Alfino et al., 2019; Ardiasih et al., 2019; Rahmatunisa, 2014; Suhartoyo, 2017). In details, Lotfi et al. (2019) revealed that Iranian and Chinese students performed differently in argumentative essays through the use of boosters, attitude markers, engagement markers, and self-mentions, even though they produced similarly in the use of hedges. Then Lu & Xie (2019) investigated the effectiveness of a critical thinking oriented instructional pattern in a tertiary EFL students' argumentative essays. The result of their study statistically indicated that students who received the instructional treatment outperformed the students in control group in terms of overall critical thinking skills and skills of identifying and evaluating the elements of thoughts. Moreover, the treatment group also performed better with regard to overall writing ability, organization and coherence.

In Indonesian context, only two scholars investigated similar interest of difficulties faced by undergraduate EFL students in argumentative essay Rahmatunisa (2014) and Suhartoyo (2017). In details, Rahmatunisa (2014) revealed and classified problems faced by EFL learners in writing argumentative essay. She found that Indonesian EFL learners faced problems in three categories: linguistics

problems, cognitive problems, and psychological problems. The highest linguistics problem was grammatical structure, while the highest problems in both cognitive and psychological problems were not statistically tabulated. And the last is a study by Suhartoyo (2017), he revealed that both high and low-level students experienced different kinds of difference in argumentative essay. Those differences were analyzed based on the two kinds of argumentative essay scoring rubrics namely; Critical Thinking Analytical Rubric (CTAR) and Scoring Rubric of Argumentative Essay (SRAE). As a result, the level difficulties affected to their critical thinking competencies.

There are several scholars discussing the term of mistakes. First, according to Alfiyani (2013) in Eng et al. (2020), mistakes can be self-corrected since the people who made a mistake have already known the proper patterns. Second, a mistake is unequivocal. It means that mistake was occurred and created subconsciously by speaker or writer (Levenson, 1992). Moreover, Corder (2008) as cited in Al-Adawi (2018) testified that mistakes occurred due to a slip of the pen or the haste of writing. Based on the above-mentioned theories of mistakes it can be concluded that mistake is the condition where the learners consciously revise the text or utterance into the correct ones.

Argumentative essay is one of comprehensive writing genre that covers several complete steps including collecting, generating, evaluating, and establishing an informative data in a brief manner. It also involves advance composition of writing since it has correlation with writing a research project. In addition, this genre requires procedures to collect the data, interviews, surveys, observation, and experiments. Moreover, students who write argumentative essays must construct a detailed thesis statement and be followed by reasonable explanation.

The method of writing an argumentative essay appears three approaches which are similar with other writing genres, such as introductory paragraph, body paragraph, and conclusion. Meanwhile, the body is broken down to two parts. So, an argumentative essay consists of five structures.

To begin, an argumentative essay must have a clear and brief thesis statement. This part views the context in general way and explains why the topic is important. This premier paragraph is crucial to comprehend by means of composing an effective essay.

Secondly, students must use logical transition so the readers can read the essay in order thinking. Logical transitions are usually put in the beginning of introductory paragraph, body paragraph, and conclusion.

Then, each paragraph in the body of essay must have one general idea that is followed by evidences to support the thesis statement. It means that the idea, however, cannot be separated from the topic of an essay. Besides, students are supposed to view some conflicting opinion of the topic rather than explaining incorrect matter.

Fourth, referring to research procedures, an argumentative essay requires accurate, detailed, and up to date informative data to support the thesis statement. Again, a good essay of argumentative must discuss the opinions not aligning the thesis.

The last, to end an argumentative essay, the students are not allowed to restate the previous opinions. This part impress the students to struggle making an explanation on why the topic is important and overviewing the main point of whole paragraph. In a nutshel, conclusion must shed the light of your work.

Based on Suhartoyo (2017) there are several criteria of good argumentative essays. The criteria are adopted from scoring rubric of argumentative essay (SRAE). In details, the components of SRAE are: (1) introduction and thesis statement; (2) development; (3)

refutation; (4) conclusion; (5) organization; (6) grammar; (7) vocabulary; (8) mechanics. In this current research, the researcher classifies the components of argumentative essay in two categories, namely: content and language features.

Methodology

This current research design adopted Mixed Method Design-Explanatory Sequential Design (Creswell, 2012). This design is chosen due to two reasons. First, the research is aimed at tabulating the common mistakes made by undergraduates EFL students in writing argumentative essay. Second, the research is also aimed at interviewing the participants by finding out the students' knowledge in regard to argumentative essays components. So, both quantitative and qualitative data will be collected sequentially in two phases, with one form of data collection (quantitative) following and informing the other (qualitative). The research design is illustrated in the following figure 1.

The participant of the research is the third semester EFL students of university of Islam Malang who are taking Writing III course. The participant of the research later is ought to write argumentative essays and later will be interviewed.
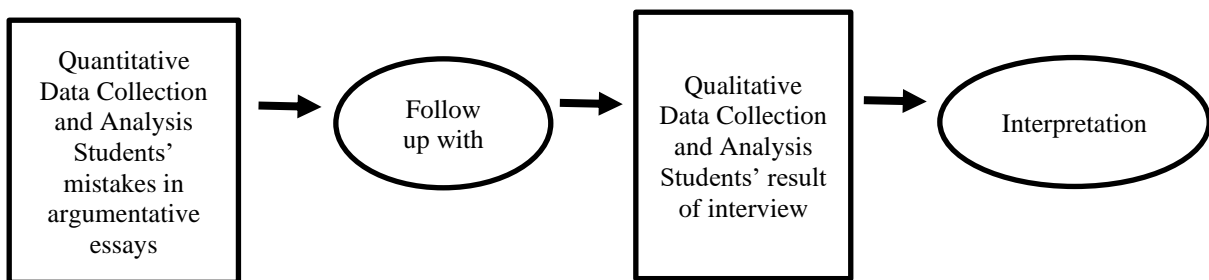

Figure 1. Mixed-Method Research Design-Explanatory Sequential Design

Based on the above-mentioned research design, it can be concluded that the researcher first will collect the quantitative data and then collective qualitative data to help explain or elaborate on the qualitative results. The quantitative data is the scores of the students' argumentative essays. The students' scores are derived from the scoring rubric of argumentative essay (SRAE) (see appendix 1). Whereas the qualitative data are collected from the students' response based on semi-structured interview (see appendix 2).

In addition, this current research adopted explanatory research design where the researcher will collect the data sequentially in two phases. Practically, the researcher first will collect the quantitative data and then will collect the data qualitatively to help interpreting the quantitative results. The rationale of using this research design is expected to capture the best both quantitative and qualitative data and to obtain quantitative results from the students' scores in argumentative essays in the first phase, and then to refine or elaborate those findings through in-depth qualitative exploration in the second phase.

In details, the quantitative data were collected at the end of the Writing III course in the form of argumentative essay. The students were asked to choose one out of 10 topics given. After that, a template of argumentative essay were given so that the students write their draft accordingly. Not only should they compose their draft according the template but also they should

consider eight aspects of argumentative essay namely: introduction, development, refutation, conclusion, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics.

In the interview section, the samples of queries are mainly emerged to confirm whether the students' responses are proportional or not with the quantitative data from students' scores in argumentative essays. Here are the examples of questions, such as: "Would you please tell me your experience in writing an argumentative essays, especially in Writing III?", "Tell me any difficulties you got while composing the argumentative essay?", "Dealing with these argumentative components (introduction and thesis statement, development, opposition/ refutation, conclusion, organization, grammar, vocabulary usage, mechanics), which component is the most difficult for you? You can answer by putting from the most to the least components?", "How did you encounter those difficulties during the process of writing?", "Did you use electronic tools to encounter those difficulties? If yes, what kinds of applications/programs helped you the most?", "Did you follow the writing stages (pre-writing, drafting, revising, writing the final result, publishing) in writing argumentative essays?", "As we know, there are several pre-writing strategies (freewriting, clustering, listing descriptive details, reasons-examples, and getting ideas from reading), which kind of strategy did you use in the pre-writing activity before writing your first draft? And why did you use that?", "How did you revise your first draft?", "What kinds of feedback helped you most in revising your first draft?", "How did you write your final result?", "Have you published your argumentative essay? If yes, where did you publish your final argumentative essay?", "Do you think publication is important? Why?

Results and Discussion
Result of Quantitative Analysis
Table 1. The Students' Scores Reported in Writing Argumentative Essay (AE)

Aspects of AE	Mean Score	N	Score percentage (%)
Introduction	7.4	15	49 %
Development	12	20	60 %
Refutation	12	20	60 %
Conclusion	8.7	15	58 %
Organization	6.9	10	69 %
Grammar	5.1	7	73 %
Vocabulary	5.1	7	73 %
Mechanics	4.4	6	73 %

Reporting from the statistical findings of argumentative aspects, the scores were varied from the lowest up to the highest. The variety of scores reflected the participants' diversity on writing skill of argumentative essay. There were eight aspects to analyze in this study. *First* is introduction. Introductory paragraph turned to be the most complex feature in writing argumentative essay. The mean score was 7.4 out of 15 and it meant that more than a half of total participants marked that writing a thesis statement was a problematic initial step. In other words, students were getting troublesome in building the main idea of an essay.

Second is conclusion. Conclusion is summarizing all over arguments and it presents a significant role to assist readers

capturing the ideas of an essay. In this context, the participants tended to restating the arguments in the same way rather than summarizing the whole paragraphs through distinct technique. They did not implement the variety of sentences to reflect the whole texts stated as reasons or arguments. From eight aspects, conclusion got 8.7 as the second-lowest score out of 15. It implies that participants only obtained 58% from 100% as a total scores when they summarize their argumentative essay. In a nutshell, participants ended up the conclusion incompatibly with the entire arguments.

Then, developing arguments and refutation were other difficult aspects for several participants. They gained 60% of all scores or 12 out of 20 for mean score, which meant developing ideas and viewing the opposing arguments were still difficult to write in argumentative essay. It could be seen from those two parts of writing which were less meaningful and poor in providing the information and argumentation related to the thesis statement as well as proven by unsuited arguments following the thesis statement.

Next is paragraph organization. Participants grasped this feature quite well by staying on point's sequent such as arranging the appropriate word signals. They reached 6.9 out of 10 for means score or 69% covering this aspect.

The last was grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. Those technical aspects did not become a matter for most of the participants, particularly in managing them into writing an essay because basically the last three aspects could be learned while making the essay. They attained scores of 70% or 5.1 from 7 for grammar and vocabulary, and 4.4 out of 6 for mechanics aspect.

Result of Qualitative Analysis

After all participants were recorded the scores of argumentative essays. They were then classified into two levels of participants, namely low achiever, and high achiever. Through qualitative data analysis, this study involved low achiever students up to nine participants. They were engaged in the interviews process and the results were coded by means of identifying all items that correlated each other.

1. Students' Difficulties in Writing An Argumentative Essay

Recalling from the first three items that found out the participants' experiences in writing the argumentative essay generated claims on their difficulties to write argumentatively. All participated students agreed that argumentative essay was a problem because it dealt with various components to cover. The problems varied from introduction, thesis statement, development, opposition/refutation, conclusion, organization, grammar, vocabulary usage, and mechanics. The most dominating problems were introduction, conclusion, and grammar. Comments such as *"my experience in argumentative essay in writing 3 maybe is annoying because sometimes I feel very difficult in this section"* and "*I don't like writing and reading literally, so hard for me to set down my writing even I Know the first step how to write"* clearly illustrated that these features were stressful and high demanding than other aspects.

2. The Common Strategies in Argumentative Writing

All participants preferred to use social strategies such as getting feedback and resourcing frequently. The strategies were implemented when they confronted the challenge on writing argumentative essay. Participant number nine, for example, accounted on the interview, *"The first I asked to my friends and if there was no ideas I search in google to solve those difficulties"*. Another participant also narrated that, "*In the difficulties I experienced, I asked friends who*

more were understanding in this matter, because it helped a lot in understanding their goals". It implies that the complexity of argumentative writing can be solved with sharing with friends as well as looking for the resources to attain their comprehension on argumentative writing. Moreover, another influencing strategy is the implementation of electronic tools. Six participants utilized *Kamusku*, Meriam Webster, and Google Translate; and the rest of them did not use any application.

3. The Specific Strategies in Argumentative Writing

The before-mentioned illustrated that participants of this study were resourceful students once they were confronting with the argumentative writing challenge. Five participants emerged various types of strategies in generating the ideas such as reading the sources to grab inspiration to write. Two participants applied free writing because it was considered helpful in developing the ideas of a topic. Then the last two students preferred to follow the writing stages by means of building a thesis statement to concluding the essay.

As regards building the first draft, participants chose to do self-proof reading before the essay was submitted to the lecturer for feedback. Feedback was fruitful to help participants understanding their own essays as well finding the reference to enrich the contents.

4. The Variation of Feedback in Argumentative Writing

Searching out feedback was other influential strategy that helped participants to ensure whether their thoughts made sense or fitted structurally into the argumentative writing. A few of participants employed the feedback to organize the aspects of argumentative writing for both of L1 and L2 through the suitable models of argumentative writing as guidance.

Getting direct feedback frequently was very meaningful to analyze errors in essay making since the participants understand what must be revised based on the eight aspects of argumentative writing?

5. Argumentative Writing and Its Publication

The amount of problems encountered by the participants in writing argumentative essay clearly influenced to the result of the work as well as discouraged them to publish their the essays virtually. None of the participants experienced publishing their work even though they know well the necessity of publication. At least there are six stages for publication, such as building understanding, brainstorming, drafting, revising, editing, and editing.

Discussion

This study investigated the problems encountered by participants considering both of statistical findings and descriptions. Most of the participants confirmed that the writing genre of argumentative complicated them to write a well-composed and understandable for the readers. Abbas & Herdi (2018) and Setyowati et al. (2017) argued that writing an argumentative essay is considered as the most complex skill to hold by students in the university. They further explained that high demand of this activity arouse some problems so they must cope with the appropriate solution. Abbas & Herdi (2018) specified the problems by ordering from developing ideas, grammar, and mechanics such as punctuation, spelling, and letters. They also promoted the collaborative strategies such as working and sharing together with friends to cope with the challenges which was similar with this current study.

Moreover, Ka-kan-dee & Kaur (2015) studied Thai EFL students tackled problems due to inadequate knowledge of grammatical, lexical, and argumentative features. Then, they offered strategies to solve, (1) conducting various activities in the classroom such as debate, pair work, group work, and illustration, (2) text analysis and presentation, (3) Implementing strategy-based instruction for argumentative writing. Previously, they researched the similar issue which commented that diagnosing the problem nor providing feedback were not effective, so there must be a critical need to examine the students' difficulties, namely think-aloud protocols (Ka-Kan-Dee & Kaur, 2014).

The key of writing this genre is constructing arguments to persuade readers (Rex et al., 2010). Because most of students faced various problem on writing argumentative essay, so there must be reasonable solution to convince the arguments, one of them is delineating the Digital Writing Tools (DWTs). Surely, the use of DWTs must engage teacher's roles to guide students exemplifying materials (Tandiana et al., 2018).

Conclusion

Writing an argumentative essay both of in second and foreign language is a challenging task for students. Understanding the students' problems on this issue is crucial so that teacher can consider the relevant material, instruction, and the strategy. Besides, the active roles of teacher in teaching argumentative essay can impact positively to students' writing improvement. This study is considered insightful by integrating components of student's difficulties, such as think-aloud protocols, to the curriculum and materials.

References

Abbas, M. F. F., & Herdi, H. (2018). SOLVING THE STUDENTS� PROBLEMS IN WRITING ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY THROUGH COLLABORATIVE WRITING STRATEGY. *English Review: Journal of English Education.* https://doi.org/10.25134/erjee.v7i1.1499

Al-Adawi, S. (2018). Omani EFL written errors at a college level. In *English Language Teaching Research in the Middle East and North Africa: Multiple Perspectives.* https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-98533-6_21

Alfino, J., Adnan Latief, M., Widiati, U., & Saukah, A. (2019). Randomized Group Vs Heterogeneous Group in Developing EFL Argumentative Essay. *KnE Social Sciences.*

https://doi.org/10.18502/kss.v3i15.4371

Altınmakas, D., & Bayyurt, Y. (2019). An exploratory study on factors influencing undergraduate students' academic writing practices in Turkey. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2018.11.006

Ardiasih, L. S., Emzir, & Rasyid, Y. (2019). Online collaborative writing technique using wiki: How effective is it to enhance learners' essay writing? *Journal of Asia TEFL*. https://doi.org/10.18823/asiatefl.2019.16.2.6.531

Bychkovska, T., & Lee, J. J. (2017). At the same time: Lexical bundles in L1 and L2 university student argumentative writing. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2017.10.008

Creswell, J. W. (2012). Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research. In *Educational Research*. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107415324.004

Eng, L. S., Luyue, C., & Lim, C. K. (2020). A comparison of the english grammatical errors of Chinese undergraduates from china and Malaysia. *International Journal of Instruction*. https://doi.org/10.29333/iji.2020.13160a

Fahim, M., & Hashtroodi, P. (2012). The Effect of Critical Thinking on Developing Argumentative Essays by Iranian EFL University Students. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*. https://doi.org/10.4304/jltr.3.4.632-638

Hedge, T. (2003). The Practice of English Language Teaching. *ELT Journal*.

https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/57.4.401

Hyland, K. (2013). Writing in the university: Education, knowledge and reputation. *Language Teaching*. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444811000036

Ka-kan-dee, M., & Kaur, S. (2015). Teaching Strategies Used by Thai EFL Lecturers to Teach Argumentative Writing. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.11.191

Ka-Kan-Dee, M., & Kaur, S. (2014). Argumentative Writing Difficulties of Thai English Major Students. *The 2014 WEI International Academic Conference Proceedings*.

Levenson, E. A. (1992). Mistakes, errors, and oversights. *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*. https://doi.org/10.1080/00107530.1992.10746777

Lotfi, S. A. T., Sarkeshikian, S. A. H., & Saleh, E. (2019). A cross-cultural study of the use of metadiscourse markers in argumentative essays by Iranian and Chinese EFL students. *Cogent Arts and Humanities*. https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2019.1601540

Lu, D., & Xie, Y. (2019). The effects of a critical thinking oriented instructional pattern in a tertiary EFL argumentative writing course. *Higher Education Research and Development*. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2019.1607830

Rahmatunisa, W. (2014). Problems Faced By Indonesian Efl Learners. *Journal of English Education*.

Rear, D. (2017). The language deficit: a comparison of the critical thinking skills of Asian students in first and second language contexts. *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40862-017-0038-7

Rex, L. A., Thomas, E. E., & Engel, S. (2010). Applying Toulmin: Teaching Logical Reasoning and Argumentative Writing. *The English Journal*. https://doi.org/10.2307/20787669

Setyowati, L., Sukmawa, S., & Latief, M. A. (2017). Solving the Students' Problems in Writing Argumentative Essay Through the Provision of Planning. *Celt: A Journal of Culture, English Language Teaching & Literature*. https://doi.org/10.24167/celt.v17i1. 1140

Suhartoyo, E. (2017). the Importance of Critical Thinking Competence : an Investigation of Students ' Writing Experiences. *International Seminar on Language, Education, and Culture*.

Suhartoyo, E., Mukminatien, N., & Laksmi, E. D. (2015). The Effect of Toulmin's Model of Argumentation Within TWPS Strategy on Students' Critical Thinking on Argumentative Essay. *Jurnal Pendidikan Humaniora*.

Tandiana, S. T., Abdullah, F., & Komara, U. (2018). *Digital Writing Tools - Teaching Argumentative Essays beyond the Traditional Frontiers*. https: //doi.org/10.5220/00071670033603 43