

STUDENTS WRITING ABILITY TEST ACCORDING TO CEFR STANDARDS USING ARGUMENTATIVE TEXT

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Abstract

This study examines the extent of 12th-grade students' writing skills by evaluating their performance against the CEFR standards. The primary objective was to identify whether students in their final year of secondary school can achieve B2 proficiency in writing argumentative texts. The study addresses a critical research gap by focusing on 12th-grade students as a transitional group, a population often underrepresented in university-level studies. Using qualitative fieldwork methods, data were collected through questionnaires to explore the underlying factors influencing writing success. The theoretical framework was based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) scales, and the analysis focused on components such as thesis clarity, organization, and language use. Findings indicated that although some students demonstrated strong content development, many still struggled with the linguistic mechanics necessary for B2 consistency. Quantitative analysis revealed significant proficiency gaps, with twenty-three respondents performing at the B1 level and only four students reaching the B2 threshold. Diagnostic profiles identified limited academic vocabulary and a fear of grammatical errors as key factors hindering students' ability to develop complex argumentative structures. By identifying these specific barriers, this study provides pedagogical insights for educators to refine their teaching strategies and align classroom assessments with international benchmarks to support students in their transition to higher education. Ultimately, the results establish a valuable diagnostic profile for future curriculum development and targeted writing interventions.

Keywords: Argumentative Text, CEFR Standards, Diagnostic Profile, 12th-grade Students, Writing Ability.

Introduction

Mastering English writing skills is a crucial requirement for high school students, particularly 12th-grade students preparing for higher education. Among the various writing genres, argumentative texts stand out as the most challenging, requiring learners to aim not only for linguistic accuracy but also to engage in complex cognitive processes such as logical reasoning and critical thinking. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) provides a standardized roadmap for assessing these skills, with the B2 level often adopted as the ideal benchmark for independent users. At this level, students should be able to produce clear and detailed texts on a wide range of subjects while maintaining perspective on current issues.

However, achieving this competency remains a significant challenge for many EFL learners in upper secondary education. The gap between curriculum expectations and actual student performance is a well-documented problem in language assessment. Although the B2 level requires a high level of thematic development and coherence, many 12th-grade students still fall below this level. Research by Suhono et al. (2025) emphasized that writing argumentative texts poses a significant challenge for English learners, who often struggle to express opinions and organize ideas logically. This is supported by the findings of Masrul and Erliana (2024), who stated that students often struggle to transform their

mental thoughts into structured written arguments. This difficulty often stems from a lack of linguistic resources and limited exposure to academic discourse. Furthermore, Saricaoglu and Atak (2022) observed that syntactic and lexical complexity vary significantly between the B2 and C1 levels, suggesting that students who fail to master complex sentence structures will be unlikely to meet the B2 descriptor.

The importance of this subject lies in its emphasis on argumentative writing as a pathway to academic success. For 12th-grade students, the ability to construct persuasive arguments is not just a classroom exercise but also a fundamental skill for university participation. According to Lee and Lee (2023), developing argumentative writing skills is a long-term process that is heavily influenced by students' pre-existing language skills. If students graduate from secondary school without reaching the B2 threshold, they may face significant challenges and obstacles in the English language teaching environment. This urgency is compounded by the fact that many students are unaware of the specific CEFR criteria used to evaluate their work. Abdulhaleem and Harsch (2025) point out that there is often a gap between how students perceive their own writing and how expert assessors assess them using specific CEFR scales, which can lead to stagnation in skill development. Theoretically, writing is viewed as a combination of language quality, content, and structure. Keller et al. (2024) argue that analytical assessment provides a more nuanced understanding of EFL writing skills at the upper secondary school level, particularly in Germany and Switzerland, which can be adapted to other EFL contexts such as Indonesia. By identifying specific linguistic features that differentiate different levels, as discussed by Ma, Wang, and He (2024), educators can better align their teaching strategies with CEFR standards.

This study uses a qualitative fieldwork approach to investigate specific factors influencing the writing abilities of 12th-grade students. Through the use of questionnaires, the study seeks to uncover the factors that influence why many students still struggle to achieve B2 consistency despite years of formal English language education. Despite the extensive literature on writing assessment within the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, most existing studies have primarily focused on undergraduate students in university settings (Suhono et al. 2025; Sawaguchi 2025; Permatasari and Susanto 2024). This leaves a significant gap in understanding the specific writing profiles of 12th-grade students who are at a critical transition point before entering higher education.

Furthermore, while previous studies often use quantitative or developmental designs to create assessment rubrics, there is a lack of qualitative field research investigating the actual barriers students face during the argumentative writing process. Many studies, such as those by Keller et al. (2024), focus on large-scale analytical assessments but often ignore subjective factors that hinder student performance in actual classroom settings. The novelty of this study lies in several distinctive aspects that distinguish it from previous literature. First, it focuses on a 12th-grade population, a transitional group rarely studied in the context of B2 achievement compared to college students. Second, it uses a qualitative field approach that connects actual writing products with student reflections. Unlike traditional CEFR studies that rely primarily on large-scale quantitative assessments or analytical rubrics to objectively measure proficiency, this qualitative field study is explicitly designed to explore the real-time, subjective cognitive and psychological barriers students experience in authentic classroom settings. By using a qualitative post-test approach in which questionnaires are administered immediately after a writing task, this study captures the immediate cognitive and psychological factors that influence student performance. This dual approach provides explanatory power that numerical scores alone cannot, enabling a deeper understanding of why students struggle with specific B2 markers such as lexical bundles or discourse coherence (Sawaguchi 2025; Purnama 2021). Therefore, this study offers a unique diagnostic profile of secondary school students' academic readiness to meet global standards.

Literature Review

The evaluation of writing proficiency in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts increasingly relies on standardized frameworks to ensure objectivity and international comparability. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is a widely used global standard that provides a set of descriptors that categorize learners into different levels of proficiency. For 12th-grade students, achieving a B2 level is often considered a key milestone, indicating their transition from basic communication to independent academic discourse. According to Waluyo and Zahabi (2024), CEFR-based assessments provide a reliable mechanism for measuring language

proficiency, particularly in higher education and upper secondary schools, because they ensure that test items align with specific linguistic benchmarks.

However, the application of these standards aimed at evaluating argumentative writing remains complex, as it involves a multifaceted interaction between linguistic accuracy, logical structure, and the ability to defend a particular point of view. Argumentative writing has been widely recognized as one of the most challenging genres for EFL learners because it demands higher-order thinking skills and sophisticated rhetorical control. Suhono et al. (2025) emphasize that developing a valid and reliable analytical rubric for argumentative essays is crucial, specifically focusing on components such as thesis clarity, organizational coherence, and the use of supporting evidence. Challenges in mastering this genre often stem from students' attempts to transform abstract thinking into a structured written format. In this regard, Masrul and Erliana (2024) found a significant correlation between well-designed writing assessments and the actual quality of students' production, suggesting that the instrument used to measure writing ability plays a crucial role in capturing students' true competencies.

The development of this ability is gradual, as noted by Lee and Lee (2023), who argue that argumentative skills in EFL contexts should be monitored through longitudinal or incremental assessments to truly understand students' progress. Linguistic features, particularly the use of formulaic language and syntactic complexity, are used as key indicators distinguishing different CEFR levels in argumentative essays. Sawaguchi (2025) identified that productive knowledge of lexical bundles such as "to conclude" or "as a result" was a significant predictor of proficiency. Students at lower levels often relied on semantically transparent phrases, while those who achieved B2 consistency demonstrated more advanced mastery of less obvious academic formulas. This finding is reinforced by Ma, Wang, and He (2024), who observed that specific linguistic markers including lexical density and sentence variety clearly differentiated students' writing across the CEFR spectrum. As a complement, Khamis, Bareed, and Suryani (2024) emphasized that mastery of academic vocabulary, especially the use of words from the Academic Word List (AWL), serves as an important indicator for achieving a higher CEFR level in argumentative essays across various disciplines. In addition to lexical and grammatical aspects, discourse relationship analysis also plays a significant role in differentiating between proficiency levels. Hanel and Kosseim (2023) found that the use of discourse relationships such as explanation and background in argumentative essays can be significantly influenced by the writer's CEFR proficiency level.

Synthesizing these previous studies reveals a critical distinction in learner demographics that is often overlooked in existing literature. While studies by Sawaguchi (2025), Khamis et al. (2024), and Suhono et al. (2025) provide robust frameworks for assessing argumentative writing, they predominantly focus on university learners. University learners typically possess a baseline exposure to English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and are primarily focused on refining sophisticated rhetorical moves. In contrast, 12th-grade secondary school students are in a transitional cognitive and linguistic phase. As highlighted by Keller et al. (2024), secondary learners face unique challenges; they must simultaneously navigate the maturation of their critical thinking skills while attempting to map these abstract concepts onto limited, general-English linguistic resources. Unlike university students who might struggle with advanced academic word lists, 12th-grade students often experience cognitive overload simply trying to maintain basic discourse coherence and grammatical precision while formulating their first formal arguments (Purnama, 2021; Permatasari & Susanto, 2024).

Achieving high scores in linguistic quality does not necessarily guarantee success in argumentation. Keller et al. (2024) highlighted a common discrepancy where students may possess strong linguistic quality but lack the structural depth or clarity of content necessary to produce a convincing argument. In addition to linguistic factors, critical thinking and mechanical accuracy have also emerged as important themes in recent literature. Sato (2022) showed that assessors often differentiate between logical reasoning and grammatical accuracy, suggesting that effective assessment must separate logic from language to provide a holistic view of students' abilities. This is particularly relevant for 12th-grade students, who may face challenges in organizing ideas coherently. For example, Purnama (2021) identified that the primary difficulty for many EFL students lies in critical thinking and maintaining discourse coherence rather than grammatical errors per se. Even students who reach higher levels of content production, such as C1, often struggle with mechanical issues such as punctuation and spelling (Permatasari & Susanto, 2024). These findings underscore the need for diverse pedagogical approaches, such as those proposed by Mayoo and Eto (2023), which integrate learning to argue and

arguing to learn, to simultaneously improve language proficiency and argumentative substance in the classroom.

Based on the synthesized literature, this study proposes a conceptual framework that maps the developmental trajectory of argumentative writing skills. As illustrated in Figure 1 below, a student's CEFR proficiency level acts as the foundation that dictates their available linguistic complexity. This linguistic complexity then serves as the operational mechanism required to construct a sound argumentative structure. Without the necessary linguistic tools (such as vocabulary, syntax, and cohesion), the cognitive process of argumentation cannot be effectively translated into a structured text.

Figure 1: Conceptual Diagram of EFL Argumentative Writing.

CEFR Proficiency	Linguistic Complexity	Argumentative Structure
General Competence B1 : Threshold level B2 : Independent User	Lexical Bundles and AWL Syntactic Variety Grammatical Accuracy	Thesis Formulation and Clarity Discourse Coherence Logical Reasoning and Evidence

Research Method

This study employed an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design, heavily emphasizing a qualitative field research approach to investigate the writing ability profiles of 12th-grade students. The primary focus of this methodology was to capture the reality of student performance in a natural educational setting. A purposive sampling technique was used to select twenty-seven 12th-grade students for this study. This specific sample size was justified because it allowed for deep thematic saturation in the qualitative analysis while remaining manageable for detailed and rigorous analytical assessment of written texts. By conducting direct research in the field, the researchers obtained authentic data on how students produce argumentative texts under specific classroom conditions. This approach is consistent with the framework suggested by Masrul and Erliana (2024) who emphasize the importance of direct assessment to understand the true competencies of English as a foreign language learners.

The data collection process was conducted in two sequential stages. In the first stage, the researcher administered a writing test in which students were asked to construct an argumentative text based on specific instructions that corresponded to the B2 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). To determine whether students' performance fell into the B1 or B2 category, the assessment process relied on strict adherence to CEFR criteria. Assessors specifically looked for B2 indicators such as the ability to synthesize information, maintain clear discourse coherence, and use complex sentence structures. Essays that predominantly featured simpler sentence forms, limited academic vocabulary, and repeated grammatical errors that sometimes obstructed meaning were classified as B1. This test served to identify students' linguistic strengths and weaknesses, particularly in areas such as thesis clarity and organizational coherence, as outlined in the analytical rubric by Suhono et al. (2025). To ensure the reliability and objectivity of the assessment, an inter-rater reliability procedure was implemented. Two independent English language educators experienced in CEFR-based assessments independently scored the writing assignments, and any discrepancies were resolved through consensus discussions before final grades were assigned. The results of this test provide a baseline of students' current proficiency levels.

In the second stage, researchers will administer a qualitative questionnaire to students immediately after they complete the writing test. The purpose of this questionnaire is to identify internal and external factors that influence their performance during the test. By gathering students' perceptions, researchers can explore the underlying causes of writing difficulties, such as academic vocabulary or a limited lexical pool, as discussed by Sawaguchi (2025). Integrating test results and questionnaire responses allows for a comprehensive analysis of not only what students achieve but also why they encounter certain obstacles in achieving B2 consistency.

Data analysis followed a thematic procedure involving data reduction and presentation to draw meaningful conclusions. The researcher analyzed written products using analytical descriptors, while questionnaire responses were categorized to identify recurring themes related to student challenges. This multifaceted analysis ensured that the findings reflect a holistic view of students' writing abilities. By examining mechanical issues alongside cognitive difficulties as noted by Permatasari and Susanto

(2024), this study provides a detailed diagnostic profile valuable for building a foundation for pedagogical development in senior high schools.

Results and Discussion

Results

The findings of this qualitative field study present a detailed diagnostic profile of the linguistic capabilities and subjective barriers experienced by twelfth-grade students. Based on the mixed-methods data collection, the students were categorized according to their CEFR proficiency levels, followed by an in-depth exploration of the factors influencing their writing performance.

Student Proficiency Levels and General Awareness

The initial stage of data analysis focused on establishing benchmarks for students' writing abilities and their self-awareness of global standards. The writing assessment revealed a significant proficiency gap among the participants. Out of the twenty-seven respondents, twenty-three students performed at the B1 level, while only four students successfully met the B2 threshold. The following table summarizes students' collective understanding of writing standards and their familiarity with argumentative text structures:

Table 1: Distribution of CEFR Levels and General Knowledge of Writing Standards

Student Category	Total Respondents	Awareness of B2 Writing Criteria	Understanding of Argumentative Structure	Knowledge of Coherence and Cohesion
B1 Level Students	23 Respondents	Majority feel Neutral or Disagree	Majority feel Neutral or Agree	Varies from Neutral to Agree
B2 Level Students	4 Respondents	Majority feel Agree or Neutral	Majority feel Agree	Mostly feel Agree

Comparative Analysis of B1 and B2 Writing Samples

To clearly illustrate the fundamental differences in linguistic complexity and argumentative structure, representative excerpts from the students' writing tasks are presented below, paired with their actual questionnaire reflections. The simulated task required students to construct an argumentative paragraph.

- **Excerpt A (Representative of B1 Level Proficiency):**

"I agree mobile phone is good. But student use phone for play games. It make them lazy to study. So, phone in school is bad and good."

Data Triangulation: This excerpt perfectly mirrors the specific obstacles reported by the B1 students in the qualitative data. The reliance on basic, semantically transparent words ("good," "bad," "lazy") and short, fragmented sentences confirms the self-reported limitations. For instance, Respondent 9 stated their main issue was "Keterbatasan kosakata" (Limited vocabulary), while Respondent 16 admitted their primary struggle was "Sulit menyusun kalimat" (Difficulty arranging sentences). Furthermore, the abrupt transition of ideas without proper discourse markers reflects the cognitive challenges noted by Respondent 14, who stated, "Saya kesulitan mengembangkan ide saya" (I have trouble developing my ideas).

- **Excerpt B (Representative of B2 Level Proficiency):**

"Although mobile technology provides extensive educational resources, its unrestricted use in classrooms often serves as a significant distraction. Consequently, students may struggle to maintain focus during lectures. To mitigate this issue, educational institutions should implement strict usage policies."

Data Triangulation: In contrast, the B2 sample demonstrates syntactic variety through subordinating conjunctions ("Although") and sophisticated lexical bundles ("extensive educational resources," "significant distraction"). The progression of ideas is logically linked using appropriate

transitional markers ("Consequently"). This high level of coherence and grammatical precision is the direct result of the active learning strategies revealed in the questionnaire. Respondent 18 explicitly credited their success to a strategic drafting process: "Menulis kalimat draf terlebih dahulu lalu merevisinya untuk memperbaiki tata bahasa dan kosakata yang kurang tepat" (Writing a draft sentence first and then revising it to improve inaccurate grammar and vocabulary). Additionally, the rich academic vocabulary stems from exposure, as noted by Respondent 24, whose main strategy was "Banyak membaca contoh teks berbahasa inggris" (Reading many examples of English texts).

Diagnostic Profile of Writing Obstacles for Students Below the B2 Threshold

An important objective of this study was to uncover why a significant number of students remain at a substandard level despite years of formal education. For the twenty-three students at the B1 level, the qualitative questionnaire revealed several recurring barriers preventing them from producing high-quality argumentative texts. These barriers are detailed in the table below:

Table 2: Obstacles and Factors Influencing Students Below B2 Standard

Primary Obstacle	Detailed Description of Student Challenges	Specific Supporting Data from Respondents
Linguistic Resources	Limited vocabulary and difficulty using academic vocabulary in long writing.	Respondents 2, 9, 10, 13, 25, 27
Grammatical Precision	Grammatical errors often interfere with the meaning and understanding of writing.	Respondents 2, 3, 16, 21, 23, 26
Cognitive and Logic	Difficulty developing ideas logically and systematically in paragraph form.	Respondents 3, 8, 13, 14, 27
Psychological Barriers	Fear of making mistakes and lack of confidence when writing long texts.	Respondents 2, 3, 6, 9, 13, 20
External and Habitual	Rarely practice writing outside of class and get less feedback from teachers.	Respondents 3, 4, 12, 17, 23

Diagnostic Profile of Writing Obstacles

Based on an in-depth analysis of student essays and follow-up questionnaires, these main categories of barriers illustrate why the transition from basic communication to independent academic discourse remains a significant challenge for EFL students. The following table summarizes these findings, linking each dimension to authentic feedback from participants.

Table 3: Diagnostic Profile of Students' Argumentative Writing Obstacles

Obstacle Dimension	Representative Participant	Original Statement
Linguistic Resources	Respondent 2	"The main reason is a lack of understanding and vocabulary when writing long texts or paragraphs in English. I also lack practice writing English texts longer than 500 words."
Grammatical Precision	Respondent 21	"Grammatical errors."

Cognitive and Logic	Respondent 14	"I'm having trouble developing my ideas."
Psychological Barriers	Respondent 3	"Lazy in learning English vocabulary."
External and Habitual	Respondent 12	Rarely practice writing in English outside of class.

Factors Supporting Success in B2 Level Achievement

While many struggled, a small group of students demonstrated the ability to meet the B2 requirements. The four students who achieved the B2 level highlighted specific strategies and behaviors that served as the foundation for their success. Their responses provide valuable insights into the effective habits required for advanced writing proficiency.

Table 4: Factors Contributing to Success in Reaching B2 Proficiency

Key Success Factor	Implementation of Learning Strategies	Specific Supporting Data from Respondents
Strategic Revision	Write a draft of the sentence first and then revise it to improve grammar.	Respondent 18
Autonomous Practice	Do writing exercises often independently and consistently.	Respondent 7
Input and Exposure	Read lots of examples of English texts to understand writing standards.	Respondent 24
Motivation and Effort	Have high motivation and strive to continuously improve writing skills.	Respondent 5

Discussion

The Gap in Linguistic Resources and Grammatical Accuracy

The findings of this study confirm that vocabulary limitations and grammatical inaccuracies are the primary barriers preventing 12th-grade students from achieving B2 proficiency. As observed in the B1 writing excerpt and corroborated by the questionnaire responses (e.g., Respondents 2 and 9), the inability to deploy academic vocabulary severely restricts thematic development. This aligns directly with Sawaguchi's (2025) theory, which asserts that productive knowledge of academic vocabulary and lexical bundles is a significant predictor of writing proficiency level. Similarly, the grammatical struggles reported by the participants support the observations of Saricaoglu and Atak (2022); they noted that syntactic and lexical complexity vary significantly between proficiency levels, making it nearly impossible for students with weak sentence structures to satisfy the B2 descriptors.

Psychological and Behavioral Barriers to Proficiency

Beyond purely linguistic deficits, subjective psychological and behavioral factors play a crucial role. The anxiety and lack of practice reported by students illustrate a significant disconnect between classroom expectations and independent learner habits. Abdulhaleem and Harsch (2025) note that this gap between students' self-perceptions and actual assessment standards often leads to stagnation in skill development. When students do not regularly engage with English texts outside of school, they fail to transform abstract thoughts into structured arguments. This specific difficulty reflects the findings of Masrul and Erliana (2024), who documented that limited exposure to academic discourse directly hinders learners from successfully navigating the argumentative genre.

Strategic Learning and the Path to B2 Consistency

Analyzing the behaviors of the B2 achievers provides a clear pedagogical roadmap. Students

who actively utilize drafting and revision strategies demonstrate the sophisticated self-correction processes characteristic of advanced learners, as outlined in the analytical framework by Suhono et al. (2025). Additionally, the habit of reading model texts provides the necessary linguistic input to build discourse coherence. This behavior strongly supports the pedagogical approach advocated by Mayoo and Eto (2023), which emphasizes integrating "learning to argue" and "arguing to learn" through exposure to quality literature. Ultimately, transitioning from B1 to B2 requires a fundamental shift from passive instruction to active, strategic writing habits, addressing the structural depth issues commonly identified in large-scale assessments like those conducted by Keller et al. (2024).

Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive diagnostic profile of twelfth-grade students' writing abilities in relation to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. The findings lead to several important conclusions regarding secondary school students' readiness for academic writing standards. First, there is a significant proficiency gap, as most students remain at the B1 level despite their imminent entry into higher education. This suggests that the typical secondary school curriculum may not be sufficient to bridge the gap towards the consistent, independent use required at the B2 level.

The significance of this study lies in identifying specific linguistic and psychological barriers that hinder student progress. The data clearly indicate that a lack of knowledge of academic vocabulary and a persistent fear of making grammatical errors are the primary factors hampering students' ability to develop complex argumentative structures. Conversely, the success of a small minority of students reveals that reaching the L2 standard is closely linked to the application of self-directed learning strategies such as consistent drafting, reading model texts, and proactively responding to teacher feedback.

The relevance of these findings extends to pedagogy and policy. For educators, the results suggest that writing instruction must shift from basic sentence construction to a more strategic process involving multiple cycles of revision. Furthermore, there is an urgent need to raise students' awareness of international proficiency criteria to align their self-perceptions with global academic standards. By addressing these specific linguistic and cognitive barriers, educational institutions can better prepare students for the rigorous demands of English communication at the university level. This study serves as an important foundation for future research aimed at developing targeted interventions to improve secondary school students' writing proficiency to the B2 threshold and beyond.

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