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Critical Thinking Ability in EFL Students' Argumentative Essay Writing: The Difficulties and The Strategies

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Abstract
The aim of research is to explore the effect, if any, of integrating critical thinking on learners' use of critical thinking skills in argumentative writing. The research used quasi-experimental desaign, it is include control group and experimental group. The data which has been quantitatively analyzed indicates that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group. The students' ability to use more credible evidence, address alternative arguments, support conclusions, and maintain the logical flow of ideas in their essays did not reach a mastery level in the posttest, yet the average level they reached is reassuring in view of the short time of the training they had. The integration of critical thinking for longer periods may bring forth encouraging outcomes. Argumentative writing constitutes an important part of second-language learners' academic writing. Data analysis indicated that most participants perceived the rhetorical aspects of English argumentative writing as difficult. Data analysis also indicated that participants mainly used cognitive, social, and search strategies, whereas metacognitive strategies were used infrequently. Potential implications of the study for second-language writing instruction are discussed

Keywords: Critical thinking, EFL, Higher education, Argumentative writing

INTRODUCTION

When learning English, the students are taught four language skills integratedly. They are reading, listening, speaking, and writing. Listening and reading are considered as receptive skills because people are involved in receiving information, while speaking and writing are productive skills since people are involved in producing information. One of the most important skills in English education is writing.

Writing is one of English language skills, determining and putting ideas in writing logically and reasonably is not easy. Because of it, they should organize the system of language well in order to be understood. Writing as the symbolic representation of language through the use of graphic signs. Unlike speech, it is a system that is not simply acquired, but has to be learned through sustained conscious effort. Not all languages have a written form and, even among people whose language has a well established writing system, there are large numbers of individuals who can not use the

system. In terms of human development, writing is a relatively recent phenomenon (George, 2010).

One of the students writing activities at school is to make an essay based on the topic in accordance with the types of writing. Through this writing activity, students can relate ideas. In composing the ideas, students also learn how to arrange words to be a sentence and paragraph until it forms a discourse. Type of students' essay can be varied according to the syllabus being applied, for example narrative, descriptive, explanation, recount, report, argumentation, and procedure; they can be called as types of writing text.

Writing skill is complex and sometimes it is difficult to teach. Requiring mastery are not only grammatical and rhetorical devices but also of conceptual and judgmental elements. Higher education is a stage in students' life where they are expected to achieve two major goals by the end of their education. They should be able to obtain sufficient knowledge about a discipline or a subject matter, and most importantly, think critically about the knowledge they have obtained and other topics or issues they face in their everyday life. While the first goal is fulfilled in most universities effortlessly, the second one, however, is universities' Achilles' heel (Halpern, 2014; Bailin et al., 1999). Fostering students' critical thinking in universities is viewed as one of the most serious challenges of today's education in the age of easy access to information. Nowadays, people are faced with an abundance of information once they turn on the radio and TV or use their social media. At the end of the day, one hardly realizes that they have received a large amount of information that may become beliefs without assessing their credibility. As university students are no exception, universities should train students on how to be able to filter the information they receive daily. However, universities seem to be far beyond fulfilling this goal. In a study that aimed to investigate the difference between the critical thinking of graduate and non-graduate students, Pithers and Soden (1991, cited in Ozmen, 2008, p. 121) concluded that there is no significant difference between the two groups. This suggests that the universities included in the study failed to instill critical thinking skills in their students.

Vdonvina & Gaibisso insists, (2013) critical thinking is knowingly hard and takes time to feel confident in it. If we think about consistent and continued development of critical thinking, we must understand it as a process. Lessons, units and a whole curriculum should include critical thinking objectives on systematic basis, which creates continuity.

Critical thinking deal with communicative skill both from teachers or others, because it required active and interactive learning. Interactive learning started with feedback. It stimulated students' thinking and learning and it also provided the teachers information about learning. With critical thinking being the expected outcome of higher education (Andrews, 2010; Halpern, 1998; Beyer, 1995; Lipman, 1985), students majoring in English should not be exempted from this 'educational ideal' (Siegel, 1985) simply because their major emphasizes the mastery of a foreign language. Given the utmost importance of the critical spirit which allows EFL learners to "question, challenge, and to demand reasons and justifications for what is being taught" (Siegel, 1985, p. 71), the present study aims to experiment the potential effects of integrating

critical on students' critical thinking ability in argumentative writing. Argumentative writing as a mode of academic writing constitutes an important part of second-language learners' academic experience at the college level in North America. Depending on their fields of study, second-language writers maybe asked to support a managerial decision, argue for an international policy, or evaluate a model developed to solve a particular problem. Because of the prevalence of argumentative writing in the academic curriculum, and because of the challenges associated with its development, a common component of English as a second language (ESL) writing classes consists of helping second-language learners develop argumentative writing skills.

Definitions of Critical Thinking

The attempt to investigate the potential effects of integrating critical thinking skills in a writing course on EFL learners' use of these skills in argumentative writing requires a thorough and accurate definition of critical thinking. However, a quick inspection at the available literature shows that an agreed-upon definition of critical thinking seems to be beyond reach as theorists from different disciplines (i.e., philosophy, psychology, and education) offer a distinctive understanding of the concept (Kennedy et al., 2010; Tsui, 1998; Lewis & Smith, 1993). As this section presents how leading theorists conceive of critical thinking, it foregrounds the points of similarity and difference among the various definitions.

Though he did not use the term "critical thinking", John Dewey (1910, 1925) was among the first philosophers who theorized about "reflective thinking" as an objective of education. Dewey defined critical thinking as an "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it ends" (Dewey, 1910, p. 2). His conception of critical thinking offers a profile of a thinker who uses the available information and facts to test the validity of a statement before accepting it as a form of knowledge. This early conception of critical thinking resonates with the objectives of contemporary education.

After paving the grounds for critical thinking in education, Bloom et al. (1956) refined the concept of critical thinking as an objective of education by establishing the renowned taxonomy that subsumes six categories of education objectives (i.e., knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation). The three categories at the top (i.e., analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) are taken to be the skills that represent critical thinking while the three categories at the bottom are basic skills that a thinker goes through. The power of the taxonomy is exhibited in its use as a reference for educators in developing critical thinking curricula, assessment tests, and education goals (Reece, 2002).

Since the 1980s and 1990s, eminent attention has been given to critical thinking as a fundamental component in philosophy and education. One of the oft-cited definitions is that of Lipman (1988, 1991). Lipman (1988) contends that critical thinking is "skillful, responsible thinking that facilitates good judgment because it (1) relies upon criteria, (2)

is self-correcting, and (3) is sensitive to context" (p. 39). Lipman's definition highlights 'good judgment' as the main outcome of critical thinking that is mainly based on criteria. Similarly, Beyer argues that critical thinking is "making reasoned judgment" (1995, p. 9).

Another definition that recurs in the literature is the one put forth by Ennis (1993, 1996) who defines critical thinking as "reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do" (1996, p. 166). His definition is reminiscent of Dewey's use of "reflective thinking" to describe critical thinking. While Ennis (1993, 1996) and Halpern (2014) use critical thinking interchangeably with reflective thinking, decision making, problem solving, and creative thinking, Beyer (1995) draws a demarcating line between critical thinking and these concepts.

Despite the plethora of definitions of critical thinking, there are some aspects that could be retained about this concept. Critical thinking can be said to be an intellectual activity of reasoning that makes use of criteria and results mainly in reasonable judgments and decisions. Central to critical thinking is skills such as analysis, synthesis, evaluation, inference etc.

Critical Thinking Skills

Ennis (2013) critical thinking is reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to belive or do. Based on theory above, critical thinking is a practical activity. At the end of the result can be not only a decision about what to believe or think, but also a decision about what action should be taken. Critical thinking leads everyone in forming the objective and logical opinion. It brings some optional ways when have to solve the problem and become solution. The own critical thinking goal is the students encourage to think and brave in delivering. In the future, hopefully it makes the higher education be the center of filtering and standarizing in a global community.

The task of integrating critical thinking in teaching raises the question of the skills that should be taught or introduced to students. Listing the skills of critical thinking stems from the fact that outlining the behaviors and practices of typical critical thinkers makes the concept more teachable and more useful for educators than merely depicting the abstract characteristics of an ideal thinker (Lai, 2011; Lewis and Smith, 1993). To start with, Ennis (2011) opts for the term critical thinking abilities instead of critical thinking skills. He identifies five general abilities that encompass further "skills": (1) basic clarification, (2) bases for a decision, (3) inference, (4) advanced clarification, and (5) supposition and integration. Moreover, in a panel of forty-six experts, the Delphi Report experts (Facione, 1990) asserted that critical thinking involves (1) interpretation, (2) analysis, (3) evaluation, (4) inference, (5) explanation, and finally (6) self-regulation. It should be pointed out that the skills presented by Ennis (2011) and the Delphi report experts (Facione, 1990) subsume sub-skills.

Putting critical thinking skills in a straightforward picture, Wade (1995) listed the following eight critical thinking skills: (1) asking questions, (2) defining a problem, (3) examining evidence, (4) analyzing assumptions and biases, (5) avoiding emotional reasoning, (6) avoiding oversimplification, (7) considering interpretations, and (8) tolerating ambiguity (Malmir & Shoorcheh, 2012). Many of these skills recur as sub-skills in the aforementioned inventories.

A closer look at the aforementioned inventories and other ones reveals that analysis, evaluation and inference are recurrent skills (Paul, 1990; Brookfield, 1987). Examining the skills that make up critical thinking was a keystone before making decisions about the instructional treatment and assessment tools in the present experiment.

Critical Thinking in EFL Writing

Besides writing skill, developing thinking skills in today's world is necessary for the students to be effective and skillful thinkers. Thinking validates existing knowledge and enable individuals to create new knowledge to built ideas and make connection between them. Thinking entails reasoning and incuiry together with processing and evaluating information. If we want to write well in English, understanding the words and grammar is not enough but you must think in English as we write and need to be able to make logical connections between the ideas and information in writing, this means we need to think logically.

Unlike integrating critical thinking in L1 education, embedding critical thinking in L2 education has not always been welcomed. Atkinson (1997) maintained that adopting critical thinking in L2 education is not feasible as it is a social practice rather than a pedagogical behavior. Despite the caution that Atkinson (1997) called for, many ESL researchers pointed out the importance of integrating critical thinking in ESL education. Chief among these are Davidson and Dunham (1997) who argued for the integration of critical thinking in EFL teaching; they conducted an experimental study in which they compared between two groups of 36 Japanese EFL learners; while the experimental group was taught a content-based intensive English course with critical thinking skills, the control group received the instruction without any critical thinking intervention (Davidson & Dunham, 1997). The results of this study indicated that the experimental group performed better than did the control group. Hence, critical thinking skills can be integrated in academic EFL instruction.

A decade later, a number of ESL researchers have attempted to study the impact of critical thinking instruction on specific language skills (e.g., listening, reading, speaking, and writing). Closely related to our project study, Fahim and Mirzraii (2014) conducted an experimental study to examine the effect of dialogic critical thinking instruction on Iranian EFL students' argumentative writing. The results of this experiment indicated that "the ability to write argumentatively crucially depends on EFL/ESL learners' being equipped with an intellectual capacity for thinking in a critical manner" (Fahim & Mirzaii, 2014, p. 8).

In an attempt to inspect the correlation between EFL learners' argumentative writing and CT, Pei, Zheng, Zhang, and Liu (2017) administered a critical thinking skills test and an argumentative writing test to 110 English majors across three grades in two Chinese universities. In order to encourage the participants' thinking, the researchers proposed a topic of writing that is culturally appropriate and familiar to Chinese students and open to discussion. The findings suggested that the correlation between the participants' critical thinking skills and English writing proficiency is statistically insignificant. Despite these results, "textual analysis of typical essays showed that

strong-CTS learners outperformed weak-CTS ones in relevance, clarity, logicality, profundity and flexibility of argumentative writing" (Pei et al., 2017, p. 31). The researchers attributed the absence of correlation to the fact that the participants came from 3 different grades which entailed 3 different proficiency levels. Interestingly, the correlation of the two same variables was found to be positive in studies of Dong and Yue (2015) and Golpour (2014) who ensured proficiency homogeneity.

In the same line of inquiry, Zeng (2012), assuming a close relationship between critical thinking and argumentative writing, taught argumentative writing to 62 first-year university students. The instructor taught argumentative writing in addition to relevant principles of critical thinking. Throughout the treatment which lasted four months, the participants wrote an argumentative essay every week following a six-step writing process (i.e., collecting resources, evaluating resources in group discussions, writing the first draft, peer review, revising the first draft, and post-writing feedback). Zeng (2012) found out that the participants could enhance the following critical thinking aspects: relevance, clarity, logic, and coherence (Zeng, 2012 cited in Dong, 2015). In the same vein, Moghaddam and Malekzadeh (2011) tested the effect of CT instruction on Iranian EFL learners' writing as well as the correlation between writing proficiency and critical thinking ability. 70 EFL learners were asked to write about a unique topic before and after the experiment; afterwards, the participants were divided into proficient and less-proficient groups in order to examine if the level of language proficiency affects the students' critical thinking skills in writing. Both groups received the same treatment which consisted of some principles of critical thinking such as evaluating the evidence for alternative points of view, weighing up opposing arguments and evidence fairly, recognizing techniques for appealing etc.

The results of the posttest revealed that both groups' writing improved qualitatively and quantitatively. They contended that integrating critical thinking principles in teaching writing helps students to write more effectively. However, the results would be more insightful if the students took a critical thinking test in order to measure the development of their critical thinking. Furthermore, a closer inspection at the topic assigned to the participants in the pre- and posttest reveals that the critical thinking principles taught during the treatment are not compatible with the nature of the topic assigned (i.e., you have 3 days to live, what would you do?) which could be written without any reference to critical thinking principles.

The aforementioned studies experimentally tested teaching critical thinking in contexts where the participants learn English merely as a second language, except the study conducted by Pei et al. (2017) where the participants were English majors. Hence, the present study aims to look into how the university students whose main focus is language respond to critical thinking teaching in a course of writing. Moreover, the correlation suggested by the reviewed studies was taken into account when designing the present experimental study as it purports to look into the extent to which students benefit from the explicit teaching of critical thinking on EFL learners' critical thinking skills in argumentative writing.

Based on the research above, the writer though these educators may object to integrating critical thinking in their syllabi due to the fact that their focus should be on

language purposes, striking a balance between critical thinking and language is bound to enable EFL university students to develop their thinking skills.

METHODS

The research design adopted in the present study is the quasi-experimental design (Campbell & Stanely, 1963; Cohen et al., 2005). In this research, the writer focus on students writing skill. Considering the purpose of the research and the nature of the problems, this research is a quantitative research. The writer used experimental research. Many types of research that might be used, the experiment are the best way to establish cause and affect relationships among variables. Experiments are not always easy to conduct (Jack R Fraenkel. and Norman E. 2006). An experimental research involved two groups: experimental class and control class. The design included a control group and an experimental group. The experimental and control groups were given the pre-test and post-test in order to investigate possible causal relationship between the treatment and the results.

Participants

All the students were enrolled in STKIP Muhammadiyah Bogor at 6th semester taking a course of Composition in addition to other 5 courses (i.e., reading comprehension, grammar, oral communication, readings in culture, and Indonesia culture and society). The number of students (N = 36) is evenly divided into two groups, 18 students in each group with an average age of 20.42. Belonging to the same age group and academic level, the participants in both groups had approximately the same level of proficiency in English. In order to ensure validity, the participants were randomly assigned to the groups.

Treatment

The research used quasi-experimental desaign, it is include control group and experimental group. Experimental Group with regard to the experimental group, the instructor explicitly integrated critical thinking skills in a course of Composition. That is, the participants were taught lessons of writing together with some critical thinking skills. Following the infusion approach where critical thinking skills are explicitly targeted in addition to certain content knowledge, the researcher identified two types of interconnected learning aims for the course: writing learning aims and critical thinking learning aims; the students were informed that throughout the semester they would develop their writing skills as well as their critical thinking skills. The critical thinking skills that were introduced to the participants' center upon the elements of arguments, constructing and evaluating a thesis, detecting fallacies, evaluating arguments, evaluating evidence etc. These skills were presented in the context of argumentative writing.

RESULTS OF RESEARCH

The means reported above suggest insights into EFL learners' critical thinking ability in argumentative writing. Their level is relatively low as the participants' scores in the pretest did not reach the average.

Though the sample is too small to make generalizations about undergraduate EFL learners, this finding is in accord with other studies which measured the critical thinking ability of first-year students majoring in English (Amrous & Nejmaoui, 2016; Pei et al., 2017). In their developmental account of critical thinking in argumentative writing across three different academic levels, Amrous and Nejmaoui (2016) concluded that Semester-Two students majoring in English do not make use of sufficient critical thinking skills in argumentative writing. Similarly, the findings shared by Pei et al. (2017) indicate that the level of critical thinking skills among Chinese students majoring in English is low. The low level of critical thinking skills among undergraduates majoring in English, be they can be attributed to the focus of the programs in the departments of English on language proficiency. For instance, a look at the courses offered to students at the departments of English in the first year could explain this finding; most of the departments of English offer courses (e.g., grammar, composition, vocabulary, reading comprehension, oral communication, study skills etc.) whose learning objective is to develop learners' proficiency in English. With courses that concentrate on language proficiency and overlook reasoning and thinking skills, a low level of critical thinking competence among language learners seems to be a plausible outcome (Moghaddam & Malekzadeh, 2011; Arju, 2010). Hence, the integration of critical thinking skills in courses such as composition and reading becomes mandatory.

The present study may suggest a portrait of EFL learners' critical thinking ability in argumentative writing, but it cannot provide any information about their critical thinking ability in a general context as it did not measure this skill using a standard test of critical thinking (e.g., Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal Test, Cornell Critical Thinking Test, California Critical Thinking Skills Test etc.). A more overarching study would have to measure students' critical thinking skills in a general context, in argumentative writing, and other contexts to see if there are any discrepancies between their performances in different contexts.

Language writers learning to do English argumentative writing. Results of the study suggest the lack of rhetorical knowledge and skill as a major cause of difficulty for ESL writers with limited writing experience when they perform an argumentative writing task. Participants' comments concerning their rhetorical difficulties are compatible with some of the results of text-based studies on L2 English argumentative writing. In this study, the participants perceived organization and development of arguments as the major areas of difficulties, and these were among the most challenging areas identified in AI-Abed-AI-Haq and Ahmed's (1994) study examining argumentative writing by Arabic ESL writers.

These results suggest that organization and development of arguments can be challenging to ESL/EFL students from different backgrounds, and not only from the textual perspective, but also from the learners' own points of view. Also, some participants' comments concerning preferring an elaborate style in Spanish writing were congruent with observations made in Lux's (1991) study. Further, participants'

comments indicate that from the learners' perspective several factors, including cultural and linguistic background, L1 writing ability, and experience with academic writing in L1 and L2, could help explain the rhetorical difficulties they experienced. These comments thus support the argument that factors other than the writers' cultural and language backgrounds can influence the rhetorical features in L2 writing (Connor, 1996; Matsuda, 1997).

CONCLUSION

The results of this study, as well as other studies, propound that the absence of critical thinking skills from language courses entails that the learners who are deprived from the opportunity to learn how to think critically (e.g., learners in the control groups) tend to perform less than the ones who benefit from critical thinking instruction. Conversely, the integration of critical thinking is bound to guide students to think more critically about the information they receive, check the credibility of sources, attempt to consider alternative theses, evaluate evidence etc.

The moderate positive results attained from the integration of critical thinking in writing for only a semester promise more positive outcomes if critical thinking is integrated in L2 writing courses for longer periods. Considerations of transferability of these skills from writing to other courses, reading for instance, are essential to examine if students would be able to transfer these skills across the curriculum. Another conclusion that the present study suggests is that critical thinking is teachable in L2 classes. However, the number of studies which experiment different approaches and techniques to facilitate critical thinking in L2 education are limited.

More studies are required in this field. In addition, the critical thinking tests used in these studies to measure students' critical thinking ability were designed for native speakers in the first place; hence, designing tests appropriate for EFL learners will ensure the validity of critical thinking assessment in this area. The findings of the present study suggest a number of implications for English language educators teaching students majoring in English. Though these educators may object to integrating critical thinking in their syllabi due to the fact that their focus should be on language purposes, striking a balance between critical thinking and language is bound to enable EFL university students to develop their thinking skills. EFL educators are, therefore, invited to set critical thinking as a learning aim besides language. When critical thinking is set as a learning aim, teachers can integrate it through Socratic questioning, argument mapping, self-assessment, multi-drafting etc. Finally, the interconnection between critical thinking and argumentative writing invites theorists and instructors of L2 writing to consider designing syllabi and teaching materials that intrinsically aim to develop critical thinking and writing simultaneously.

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