

## THE ROLE OF CRITICAL READING ACTIVITIES IN CRITICAL WRITING CLASS

**Karmila Mokoginta**

English Department, Universitas Hasanuddin  
(karmilamokoginta@yahoo.co.uk)

### Abstract

This study aims to find out if critical reading can give effect on students' skill in academic writing. It also aims to describe the students' perception about the combination between critical reading and critical writing activities. The research was conducted in five meetings in an Academic Writing class at the English Department, Hasanuddin University. Following a lecture about critical writing, the students were asked to write an essay. After that they received explanation about critical reading and wrote another essay. The essays written before and after the students received explanation about critical reading were analysed and compared. The results show that the effort to teach students critical reading has not yet given significant impact on the students' academic essays. This was likely to be influenced by the learning method and the topic of essay in the exercises. Findings from the discussions revealed that it was difficult for the students to write the essays in group as it was not easy for the group members to agree on one opinion.

**Keywords:** *English, critical thinking, reading, academic writing*

### 1. Background

One of the major difficulties found by students in writing an argumentative essay is how to integrate opinions and evidences from other sources into their writings. Many learners use opinions and evidences, but forget to evaluate the opinions or evidences, or relate them into their own situation. This is more evident in academic writing in which a writer is supposed to be able to develop arguments based on facts and evidences. In other words, the students' writing do not reflect critical thinking characteristics, that are actually required for an English academic writing.

This problem encouraged the writer to reflect on the teaching method she had used in her writing class. It was found that most of the time the writing class was devoted for teaching the students about paragraph, essay structure, and writing techniques (such as paraphrasing and summarizing). A few learning sessions were used for discussions about the topic to write, and about supporting points to be used in the essays. The students were required to read independently, and use the reading materials to support their ideas when they wrote essays. However, it seems that very limited time has been allocated for students to share what they read, and how to evaluate the sources they read. In short, there was very limited integration of reading activities in the writing class taught by the writer.

Lack of reading and the absence of adequate time to discuss information obtained from reading activities might have caused the lack of ability among the students to develop arguments in their essays. In this research, the writer designed learning activities that combined critical reading and critical writing activities. The activities were used in the Academic Writing class taught by the writer to investigate to what extent critical reading activities have an effect on students' writing ability.

An explanation about the relationship between reading and writing is given by Bazerman (1980). The author argues that the process of reading a text and writing something related to the text is comparable to a "written conversation" (p.657). He proposes what he calls a conversational model of the relationship between reading and writing. The author explains further that "Conversation requires the absorption of

what prior speakers have said, consideration of how earlier comments relate to the responder's thoughts, and a response framed to the situation and the responder's purposes" (p.657). Having said this, it can be understood that Bazerman tried to say that the process of conversation is similar to the process when writers respond to what they read.

The process of conversational model proposed by Bazerman (1980) includes several stages as follows:

1. comprehending the thinking offered by an author in a text, the evidences the writer used in supporting opinions, and the real goal of the writer (p. 658);
2. comparing the opinions from the text with our own ideas about the subject matter (p.659);
3. evaluating the text, deciding whether the text has achieved its goal, and comparing the writer's ideas with the reality and the opinions of other people (p.659);
4. deciding on what aspect to be focused later and building our own ideas on the subject matter based on the results of the whole process of reading.

Bazerman's model, in the writer's opinion, can be considered a critical way of reading a text. Critical reading employs not only taking and following the writer's ideas, but also evaluating the information through comparison between what the writer says, the reality, and other writers' ideas. The writer agrees with Bazerman's saying that:

"... if students are not taught the skills of creating new statements through evaluating, assimilating, and respond-ing to the prior statements of the written conversation, we offer them the meager choice of being parrots of authority or raconteurs stocked with anecdotes for every occasion. Only a fortunate few will learn to enter the community of the literate on their own" (1980, p. 661).

This model of critical reading is necessary if we want our students to critically develop their arguments in writing.

In a more general view, the role of critical thinking in language learning has been emphasized. For example, Kabilan (cited in Liaw 2007, p.48) gives an advice that "for learners to be proficient in a language, they need to be able to think creatively and critically when using the target language". Another expert, Davidson (cited in Liaw 2007, p.50) also shows the importance of critical thinking in learning a second language as he says that it is justifiable for those teaching a second language to teach students the elements of critical thinking.

Being aware of the close relationship between Critical Thinking and language learning, Liaw (2007) conducted a study about the use of content-based approach in teaching critical thinking (p. 57) to 32 students of a Taiwan Junior High School (p. 59). The results were very positive. For example, it was found that the students could gain the analysis and synthesis skills after the treatment (p.65), and at the end of the experiment, there was a meaningful improvement of the students' English skills (p.69). Moreover, the students' perspective on the use of content-based approach was very good (p.69).

In relation the implementation of Critical Thinking, it is important to review the somewhat widespread opinion about lack of critical thinking among Asian students. For example, according to Liaw (2007, p. 49) acquiring Critical Thinking skills seems to be more difficult for English students from Asia compared to their counterparts from different ethnic groups. This author thinks that the practice of English learning in Taiwan does not support the effort to increase students ability to

think critically (p. 49).

However, there might be some changes. The study by Liaw above shows that it is possible to promote Critical Thinking to Taiwan students. Another author who conducted a study with Japanese students argued that:

“Specifically, because of changes in society which have recently been manifested in the education system, including access to the Internet, there may now exist a greater sense among a younger generation of Japanese learners that they are in a position to voice their ideas clearly, and to criticize the ideas of others regardless of their status” (Stapleton 2002, p.256).

Another expert has concluded that ESL students’ limited writing skill in English is not really related to the characteristics of writing in the students’ native language (Oda 2008, p.157). It is more likely, according to this author, that ESL students have poor writing ability because they do not write frequently, and because they have limited knowledge about English vocabularies and how to write English sentences correctly.

The research question as stated below:

1. What are the effects of critical reading activities on students’ academic writings?
2. What do students think about the integration of critical reading activities into Academic writing?

The objectives of this research were:

1. To describe the effects of critical reading activities on students’ academic writings;
2. To explain what students think about the integration of critical reading activities into Academic writing.

It was expected that this study can provide a description of the effect of critical reading in students’ ability to write critically. The findings can be useful for teachers in designing exercises that can stimulate students’ critical thinking ability, both in reading and writing.

## **2. Method**

### **Research Procedure**

This study was conducted in five meetings with a procedure as follows:

#### **Meeting 1:**

1. The researcher (R) distributed a questionnaire to find out whether the students (Ss) had ever joined some courses relevant to Academic Writing subject, and whether they had studied about critical thinking, critical reading, and critical writing prior to taking the Academic Writing class.
2. R provided Ss information about critical writing.

#### **Meeting 2**

1. Ss were given two texts containing different opinions about school uniforms.
2. Ss read the texts and had group discussion to determine their position towards the issue discussed in the essays.
3. Ss developed an outline of their essays using the two-sided argumentative essay model. It was required that the essay consists of five paragraphs: an introduction paragraph, a paragraph about the first side of the issue, a paragraph about the other side of the issue (contrast to the first side), an evaluation paragraph, and a concluding paragraph. The evaluation and conclusion can be combined in one paragraph.
4. Ss wrote the the ‘evaluation’ paragraph in the class, and wrote the whole essay outside the class (Exercise 1)

### Meeting 3

1. R and Ss discussed the following questions to reflect on the previous writing activity.
  - How do you feel about the task?
  - How was your feeling when reading different opinions in the given sources?
  - How did you react to the different opinions?
  - Did you try to examine the arguments in the sources? Please give an example.
  - Did you try to find alternative views of the arguments? Please give an example.
2. Ss were given input about critical reading and an example of how to do critical reading using an essay about the positive sides of wearing school uniforms.

### Meeting 4

1. Ss did a critical reading exercise in groups using an essay about the negative sides of wearing school uniforms
2. Ss were given two texts containing different opinions about whether college education is necessary. The students were given a homework to read the texts critically and used them as references to develop a critical essay (Exercise 2).

### Meeting 5:

R and Ss discussed the following questions to reflect on the previous writing activity.

- How do you feel about the task?
- How was your feeling when reading different opinions in the given sources?
- How did you react to the different opinions?
- Did you try examine the arguments in the sources? Please give an example.
- Did you try to find alternative views of the arguments? Please give an example.
- Do you think your current writing is more critical than the previous one? Explain and give example.
- Do you think your knowledge about critical reading helps you in writing your essay? Elaborate your answer.

### The Essay

The respondents wrote essays in exercise 1 and 2. In the first exercise, the topic is about whether school uniforms are necessary, while the topic of the second essay is whether college education is still worth it.

The students wrote using the double-sided argumentative essay model. It consists of 5 paragraphs: an introduction, a summary of positive arguments, a summary of negative arguments, an evaluation paragraph, and a concluding paragraph. The last two paragraphs can be combined into one paragraph.

In the evaluation paragraph, students were supposed to evaluate both positive and negative arguments. They can also compare the existing argument in the summary paragraphs with the reality to develop new ideas. Repetition without evaluation is regarded uncritical. Students can add new ideas in response to the existing arguments (in paragraph 2 and 3). The new idea needs to be explained. Evaluation is the main critical trait assessed in the students' writings in this study.

### Research Data

The data of this study are as follows:

1. Data from questionnaires asking students' previous relevant courses and experience with critical thinking, critical reading, and critical writing

2. Data from essays (exercise 1 and 2) written by students before and after they were given material about critical reading. The essays were divided into six sets of essays. Each set consists of two essays written by the students in exercise 1 and 2.
3. Data from the discussion about the exercises.

### Method of Data Analysis

The data from the questionnaires were tabulated. The essays written in exercise 1 and 2 were analysed to identify students' responses towards the positive and negative arguments in the essay. In the evaluation paragraphs written by respondents in this study, six kinds of response were found, including evaluating ideas, comparing an existing idea with similar new idea, stating new ideas with explanation, repeating ideas without evaluation, stating a clear new idea that is not connected to the existing arguments, and stating unclear new ideas. Each kind of response is given scores as follows:

- Evaluating ideas : 3 points
- Comparing existing ideas with new similar ideas: 2 points
- Stating new ideas with explanation : 1 point
- Other kinds of response : 0 point

The points were calculated to get the score of each essay.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### Findings from questionnaires about respondents' previous relevant courses and experience with critical thinking, critical reading, and critical writing

Students' answers in the questionnaires show that sixteen students had studied for four semesters in the university, and one student had studied for six semesters. One student did not answer the question. The data from questionnaires also show that most students had taken Reading and Writing subjects. Only 1 student had taken the Academic Writing subject. In terms of training on critical thinking, almost all students reported that they had learned about critical thinking in general, but very few had specific trainings on critical reading and critical writing.

#### Findings from students' essays (Exercise 1 and 2) written before and after they were given material about critical reading.

Each exercise was analysed to find out whether the students' writing reflect the nature of critical thinking. The way of analysis has been explained in section 4.4. An example of analysis of the first set of essay is presented here.

##### Set 1 - Exercise 1

PARAGRAPH 2 (Positive Sides)	Paragraphs 4 and 5	
	Evaluation or Comparison	New Ideas
School uniforms increase student safety	No evaluation	"students can reduce their outcome to buy new clothes" (not connected to previous ideas)
School uniforms make students focus on education, not on their clothes	No need to waste time for uniform treatment (repeating ideas without evaluation)	"uniform could be identity" (unclear statement / no explanation)
School uniforms make	No evaluation	different attitude

everyone feels accepted		between Americans and Indonesians toward uniform, Americans are more open minded (no explanation what positive implication will be brought)
<b>PARAGRAPH 3</b> <b>Negative sides</b>	<b>Paragraphs 4 and 5</b>	
	<b>Evaluation or Comparison</b>	<b>New Ideas</b>
School uniform policy does not recognize diversity (limiting individuality)	No evaluation	-
School uniforms increases violent attacks	No evaluation	-
School uniforms do not have an impact on students' academic achievement	“uniform actually doesn't impact toward the intelligence” (Repeating ideas without evaluation)	-

This essay does not have any point. There was no evaluation made by the students. There were two new ideas stated, but they were not elaborated. Another new idea was not connected to the idea existing in the essay the students read as the reference.

**Set 1 - Exercise 2**

<b>PARAGRAPH 2</b> <b>(Positive Sides)</b>	<b>Paragraphs 4 and 5</b>	
	<b>Evaluation or Comparison</b>	<b>Evaluation or Comparison</b>
“college graduates get a lot of income”	No evaluation	Graduates have good knowledge (new statement without evidence)
“so many job opportunities that available for college graduates”	No evaluation	-
interpersonal skills (e.g from partying)	Students in Indonesia learn about organization at colleges, giving them interpersonal skill (comparing ‘partying’ and ‘organisation’, two activities resulting in similar interpersonal skill) = <b>2 points</b>	-

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PARAGRAPH 3 Negative sides	Paragraphs 4 and 5	
	Evaluation or Comparison	Evaluation or Comparison
Students should pay back	No evaluation	Some students cannot complete their study due to financial problem (irrelevant idea)
Many graduates find it hard to find jobs	No job guarantee for college graduates (Repeating ideas without evaluation)	
Many successful people are not college-graduates	No evaluation	

This essay was given two points for comparing the idea about the positive effect of partying (mentioned in the essay the students read as the reference) with the benefit of joining organisations in the university (the students' experience).

The following table summarizes the students' responses in the evaluation paragraph of their essays.

Students' responses	Set 1		Set 2		Set 3		Set 4		Set 5		Set 6	
	Exc 1	Exc 2	Exc 1	Exc 2	Exc 1	Exc 2	Exc 1	Exc 2	Exc 1	Exc 2	Exc 1	Exc 2
Evaluating ideas (3 points)			1 (3)		1 (3)		2 (6)	2 (6)			2 (6)	—
Comparing existing idea with similar new idea (2 points)		1 (2 points)										—
New ideas with explanation (1 point)							1 (1 point)	1 (1 point)			1 (1 point)	—

<b>Scores</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>0</b>
Repeating ideas without evaluation	4	1	2		2		1	2	1	1		2
No evaluation	2	4	3	6	3	6	3	2	5	5	4	4
New ideas without explanation	3				1		1		3	1		

The scores of each set of essays are as follows:

Essay Set Number	Score of Essay from Exercise 1	Score of Essay from Exercise 1	Increase or Decrease of Scores
1	0	2	Increase 2 points
2	3	0	Decrease 3 points
3	3	0	Decrease 3 points
4	6	7	Increase 1 point
5	0	0	Remain constant
6	7	0	Decrease 7 points

It can be said here that the improvement is not satisfied. Only two groups (Set 1 and Set 4) could increase their points. Group 2, 3, and 6 had decreasing points. Group 5 did not even gain any points in both exercises.

This phenomena can be related to two causes. Firstly, the exercise 1 was done in class under the teacher's supervision, so that the students could be more serious. Moreover they could always consult the teacher for any help they needed. The second exercise was done outside the class as a homework. It might be possible that the students were not very serious, and the source of help could be limited. There is an indication here that having discussion and doing writing exercise in classes is more effective for students in this study. Secondly, the topic in the second exercise seems to be more challenging than the one in exercise 1. This shows that topic selection is influential in the effectiveness of writing exercise.

#### **Findings from the discussion before and after students obtained critical reading materials**

Students found exercise 1 challenging since both positive and negative arguments were strong and convincing. It was difficult for the students to determine their position. This difficulty gets bigger when the students wrote the second essay



(exercise 2). They had difficulties not only in determining position, but also in achieving agreement between the group members. For example, a student said:

*“Tugas kelompok kurang efektif atau kurang efisien. Outcome tidak sekritis kalau kerja individu, karena banyak ide sehingga sulit menentukan arah berpikir”.*

Group work is less effective or less efficient. The outcome is not as critical as when we do the task individually. There are many ideas. It is difficult to see the direction of our thinking (my translation).

There might be a possibility that the students had more difficulties in exercise 2 (after they were taught Critical reading) because some of them became more critical so that it was difficult to agree on one opinion. Another possibility is that the students have limited skill of team work. It is also possible that the difficulty in making agreement was caused by the challenging topic. Essay 2 discusses whether college education is still worth it. It is highly likely that it is difficult for the respondents to accept some arguments saying that college education is not worth it as they are all university students.

Furthermore, in response to the different opinions presented in the source essays they read, after doing the first exercise, a student said that she was confused, and could not see the relationship between wearing uniforms and increasing violent attacks. However, two students had positive responses. One said that he tried to evaluate the supporting details. For example, an opinion is considered weaker than a research finding. The other one said that she felt motivated to find another source for further information. After receiving materials about critical reading and write the second essay (exercise 2), the students tend to have negative feelings. Three students expressed their feelings by saying “sulit untuk dipercaya” (hard to believe), “kaget” (get surprised), and “bingung” (confusing). This, again, may be connected to the topic of exercise 2 (college education), that can be more difficult than the topic of exercise 1 (school uniforms).

Despite all the difficulties, some students did think about the arguments in the source essays. In writing the essay about school uniforms, one student compared the situation with the case happened in JIS (Jakarta International School). Another student evaluated the relationship between wearing school uniforms and fighting. In exercise 2, one student evaluated the idea about interpersonal skill. Another student tried to find out more information about Steve Job.

Finally, being asked whether knowledge about critical reading is useful in writing, a student said that it is helpful as it helps them to know the direction of their arguments. Similarly, another student thought that by doing critical reading first, he/she was able to write in a more structured way.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This study shows that the short training of Critical Reading and Critical Writing has not yet given much impact on the students’ academic writing skill. The students perceived the exercises difficult and confusing. This is understandable since the time was very limited. The students need more sessions of learning, more examples, and more practices in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of how to read and write critically, especially in integrating what they have read into their writings. However, there are lessons learnt from this research. Firstly, it is important to choose a method of learning that is suitable with the students’ situation and attitude. Secondly, it is essential to select a topic of writing exercise that is appropriate with the students’ level of critical thinking. Finally, in order to write critically, students

need time to read critically and discuss what they read with other students.

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