

## INVESTIGATING STUDENTS' ONLINE CRITICAL READING SKILL: A STUDY IN AN EFL CONTEXT

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**Abstract:** The digital lifestyle requires students to read any online discourse more critically. The paper presents the result of a study in which 42 EFL learners are asked to demonstrate their critical reading skills through answers to the questionnaire and test. Both instruments are adapted from Cottrell's (2011). The participants are intermediate EFL learners in Indonesia. They are 19-20 years of age, male and female. All of them enroll the Discourse Analysis course. The result reveals that most of them have a positive attitude and give a positive response to some key questions under the critical thinking skills. They show the ability to identify unfair techniques used in a text and are good at reading between and beyond the lines. They do further research when they are hesitant about something they read and know how to evaluate source material. With some refinements and piloting, future research might be done on other language skills.

**Keywords:** critical thinking; online resources; critical reading

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### INTRODUCTION

Digital lifestyle requires skills that focus on critical learning and innovation. The ability to ask and answer important questions, to critically review what others say, to pose and solve problems, to communicate and work with others, and to create new knowledge are the core of those skills (Trilling and Fadel, 2009).

Davies & Barnett (2015) mention a threefold definition of critical thinking, including attitude, action, and outcomes. Attitude includes openness to multiple ideas, flexibility or readiness to travel literally with those ideas, and desire to share knowledge. Action covers traveling with ideas, collaborating to obtain multiple viewpoints, making judgment based on evidence, synthesizing complex data, and stepping back to reflect. Outcomes includes obtaining distance, shifting paradigm, and having a new insight.

Critical thinking skill refers to the individuals' ability to think and to decide considering any possible facets. In this demanding era of critical skill, enhancing learners' critical thinking skill is considered one of the teachers' crucial tasks. It is due to their students' high exposure on the new media. Critical thinking skill is a cognitive skill which includes identifying other people's position and argument, evaluating the evidence, weighing up opposing arguments,

reading between the lines, recognizing technique that is used to make certain position more appealing, reflecting an issue in a structured way, drawing conclusions, synthesizing information, and presenting a point of view in a structured way (Cottrell, 2005).

Critical thinking is a process of intellectual discipline that actively conceptualize, apply, analyze, synthesize, and/or evaluate an information (Hasan et al., 2013). Cottrell, 2005) mentions that critical thinking is a cognitive activity, associated with using the mind. Learning to think in critical and evaluative ways means using mental processes such as attention, categorization, selection, and judgement.

As one of the skills under critical thinking skill, critical reading is a skill that university graduates are expected to develop (Bråten & Braasch, 2017). By critical reading means the activity of reading that involves identifying patterns of textual elements, distinguishing main ideas from supporting details, evaluating thoroughly, making a judgement on how a text is argued, and showing relevant inferences about the information in the text (Manarin et al., 2016).

The purpose of critical reading can be seen as linguistic, conceptual/critical, and cultural. Linguistic aim means helping students to understand the text in terms of its ideological meaning and the grammatical points. The conceptual aspect aids them to increase the epistemic literacy and move beyond the text to develop an argument around it. The cultural aim promotes insights into cultural assumptions and practice (Wallace, 2003).

Just as any other skills, critical reading does have goals, some of which will not be found on the page the students read. The information concerning these types of goal is not overtly presented. They need to be inferred from the text. Recognizing the writer's purpose, understanding the tone and recognizing bias involve inferring content, language and their pattern choices. It is necessary to open the students' eye that there is a huge possibility that a writer presents a biased or one-sided viewpoint and they, as the readers, do not have to accept the writer's view. In being critical reader, the students need to question whether the writer provides sufficient support for the idea presented, whether the writer is biased, and even whether the source of the material is reliable.

In the classroom context nowadays, with abundant online discourse students may come across, both on personal and educational facets, and the amount of screentime they may encounter every day, it is hard not to blend the learning process. The class combines making use of online digital media with traditional methods because of the growing interest in blended

learning and the increasing awareness that its approaches and designs can significantly enhance the learning experience. Online reading becomes an essential learning and teaching activity in most institution (Wu & Chen, 2011). The Internet is dominant, and it provides opportunity for the pedagogy. Multiliteracies includes “reading the word and reading the world” (Freire & Macedo, 2005). Reading does not only decode the written word, but it is also preceded by and intertwined with knowledge of the world. The competency includes both using the web to locate the information and knowing how to judge the credibility, bias, and perspectives of the sources (DiYanni & Borst, 2017)

Teaching critical reading skills develops learners to be critical thinkers. This does not only prepare them to be better critical readers in schools but also produce better school leavers who could survive in the real world (Kadir et al., 2014). This also works with the online discourse. Students live with the fact that those online discourses do exist in their personal, social and professional life. This condition requires them to read those discourse either at their personal interest or because they are asked to do so.

Research on critical thinking skill have been done on various contexts. They vary on the subject, setting, specific skills to be tested, level of the students etc. The research done by Indah & Kusuma (2016), conducted to the Indonesian students learning English language at Maulana Malik Ibrahim State Islamic University, reveals that most of the respondents have strong awareness of the importance of reading habit, the time management and broadening this learning sources from internet. However, this notion might not be well implemented or their views which are not practiced into reality due to various aspects. The result of this study also reveals that a notable factor affecting the ease to express critical thinking is the language proficiency. A critical thinker can express his or her thought well by means of good language use either in spoken or written form.

The second related research is done by Djiwandono (2013) entitled “Critical Thinking Skills for Language Students”. The respondents were eight fifth-semester students from English Letters Study Program of Ma Chung University who were taking a Business Correspondence class. The data were collected at the beginning of the course through questionnaires. There were three questions asked to the respondents: the steps that they took when they were about to learn a certain topic in Business Correspondence, the questions they asked when learning a model

letter that they obtained themselves, and questions they asked by heart when listening to a classmate's presentation about a business letter.

The third is the research done by Mambu (2017), "The seeds of critical pedagogy in Indonesia have actually grown rapidly especially after the former authoritarian Indonesian second president Soeharto stepped down from power in 1998". However, he notes that critical pedagogy in ELT in Indonesia is still lacking. Mambu's study was conducted to the students in a teacher training program majoring English and used thematic investigation, as outlined by Freire, to encourage critical dialogue in response to four pictures (codes): an advertisement for McDonalds, a beauty pageant, a crowded city, and a beggar. Prior to the collection of data on the comments to the pictures, the students investigated various themes including oppression in Indonesian education, critical consciousness (see Freire 2021), and humanizing pedagogy. Using English, the students commented and interpreted these pictures with various levels of criticality. This level was determined using a coding system. The breadth of the students' thinking was measured using a number scale (0-2) where the numbers were linked to definitions of levels of critical thinking: 0 being low and 2 being high. The depth of their meaning was measured using a letter scale (A-C) where A represents a poor description and C represents the deepest level the students were able to express. The breadth and depth scales were placed on a rubric. The result showed that the student teachers showed various degrees of criticality.

With the background and some explanation cited above, the research question for the present study is to what extend students' online critical reading in dealing with online discourses. This research is aimed to explain not only students' critical reading skill but also how they perceive themselves as critical thinkers. The concept of critical thinking skills refers to the explanation proposed by Cottrell (2005) seeing critical thinking as the knowledge, skill, and attitude. This research serves another view on the critical skill especially in online critical reading skill in a tertiary EFL classroom in Indonesia.

## **METHOD**

This small-scale research is undergone in an EFL class in a private university in Bogor, Indonesia. It is conducted to students who enroll the Discourse Analysis class, a compulsory subject for English major, in which the students do a lot of reading. Beside reading texts and articles, watching video and movies are also done occasionally prior to a discussion and other tasks either for individual or group works.

The population is the third-year students, and the sample is a class consisting of 42 learners, with 33 females and 9 males, aged in a range between 19-20 years old. They have adequate vocabulary to comprehend general and academic text in English. They are all digital natives and exposed to online discourses on a daily basis.

The participants of this Discourse Analysis course are chosen as the subjects of the research since they encounter with online English discourses more than they need to read for other classes. Upon enrolling the course, they are expected to show the ability to analyze some types of discourse including news, film, ads, songs, short stories, novels, and humor. In this subject, they are also required to perform a critical discourse analysis. They do not only analyze the discourse as it is, but also critically question the writer's intention and some other items related to critical thinking framework.

The first instrument is a questionnaire (see Appendix A) consisting of 25 closed questions, adapted from Cottrell (2005). It is a self-assessment on their critical thinking knowledge, skill, and attitude. The questions number 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 13, 17, 18, 23, and 24 are the key questions and the rest are supplementary, all of which are given to gain the data. Key questions include the ability of pointing out potential weaknesses in a writing, the ability to remain focused on the exact requirements of an activity, the ability of offering criticism, the ability of comprehending the line of reasoning, the awareness that one's current beliefs might prejudice fair consideration of an issue, the ability of separating key points, the ability of going over facts in order to reach an accurate view, the ability of reading between the lines, the willingness of finding out more, the ability of presenting an argument clearly, the awareness that one's own upbringing might prejudice fair consideration of an issue, and the ability to evaluate source materials. Supplementary questions include the ability of differentiating the meaning of 'argument' in critical thinking, the ability to analyze the structure of an argument, the ability of identifying the line of reasoning, the ability of recognizing the signal used in an argument, the ability of identifying unfair technique, the ability of evaluating the evidence to support a point of view, the willingness to pay attention to small detail in an argument, the ability to weigh up different points fairly, the understanding of the structure in an argument, the ability of differentiating between descriptive and analytical writing, the ability of spotting inconsistencies in an argument and identifying patterns, and the last is the ability to understand why ambiguous language is often used in a research papers. The questionnaire, which appears in a form, is

distributed using an online platform. The respondents are required only to tick the bullet that corresponds to their choice. They are given a specific range of time to fill in the form.

The second instrument is the test, also adapted from Cottrell (2005). It is intended to support the data gained from the questionnaire. It consists of 15 closed questions with two options each: *Yes* and *No*, including the ability to identify the writer's position on the issue and its reasoning justification, the ability to identify the structure of the argument, the ability to identify inconsistencies and any non-essential matters, and the ability to identify whether the writer's belief or self-interests unfairly distort the argument (see the Appendix B). The students are asked to read an online text on their topic of interest prior to the test.

Data collected are then analyzed. The answers to the questionnaire and tests are classified and counted for its mean, median and mode; followed by the description. The response to the statements in the questionnaire is rated 0-4, noting that 0 represents strongly disagree, 1 is disagree, 2 is sort of agree, 3 agree, and 4 is strongly disagree. With those, the scale falls into two big categories: agree (positive) and disagree (negative). The lower the score, the more likely someone is to need to develop his critical thinking skills. With the score of 45 or below, a learner is considered having difficulty about critical thinking (Cottrell, 2005).

## **FINDING AND DISCUSSION**

From 42 subjects, there are three (7.1%) having the following scores: 42, 43, and 45 in the self-evaluation questionnaire on critical thinking that involves knowledge, skills and attitudes. The rest 39 learners show a wide range of score, from 49 to 89, with the mean of 64, median of 62, and mode of 62 and 64 with four times of occurrence. The result of the research show that most (92.85%) of the learners have a good critical thinking skill. Cottrell (2005) mentions that the score of over 75 means the test takers are very confident about their critical thinking ability.

Here are the results of the questionnaire (Instrument #1) for the key questions. As many as 33 (78.57%) respondents consider themselves capable of pointing out potential weaknesses in the text they read. Forty-one (97.61%) students claim that they could remain focused on the exact requirements of an activity. Thirty-six respondents (85.71%) have the ability of offering criticism. Thirty-seven (88.09%) of them comprehend the line of reasoning well. As many as 37 (88.09%) are aware that their current beliefs might prejudice their fair consideration of an issue. Forty (95.23%) respondents can separate key points in the text they read. Thirty-eight (90.47%)

of them have the ability of going over facts in order to reach an accurate view. Most of them (97.61%) can read between the lines. This is supported by the fact that the same number claim they willingly find out more about something they read when they are not sure about it. The same number also goes with respondents who consider themselves for having the ability of presenting an argument clearly. As many as 37 (88.09%) are aware that their own upbringing might prejudice their fair consideration of an issue. The last is that 40 (95.23%) respondents can evaluate the source materials.

The answer to the supplementary questions show that most of them consider themselves of having positive attitude towards the following items: differentiating the meaning of 'argument' in critical thinking, analyzing the structure of an argument, identifying the line of reasoning, recognizing the signal used in an argument, identifying unfair technique, evaluating the evidence to support a point of view, paying attention to small detail in an argument, weighing up different points fairly, understanding the structure in an argument, differentiating between descriptive and analytical writing, spotting inconsistencies in an argument and identifying patterns, and understanding why ambiguous language is often used in a research papers.

The result of the self-evaluation test (Instrument #2) shows that the respondents get a fair score. There is only a few of them portray what they answer at the questionnaire. As many as 10 (23.80%) give correct answers to most questions in the test. The rest only give two or three correct answers.

In this research, the respondents are assigned to read a text based on what might interest them best. This is the main reason why some students find what are being asked in the test easily, but some do not. It might be caused by different lexical density and organization of the texts. For example, the writer's current position on an issue is clearly spotted in one text but might not be easily found out where he stands in other texts.

## **CONCLUSION**

After observing the data from the questionnaire and the test, it is found out that the data gained from one instrument does not match the data from another instrument. The learners who confidently state or consider themselves as critical readers do not necessarily show knowledge and skills related to related way of reading. This might be caused by some psychological barrier, as mentioned by Cottrell, two of which are lack of practice and affective reasons. Other barriers

are misunderstanding what is meant by criticism, lack of methods and strategies, reluctance to criticize those with more expertise, mistaking information for understanding, and insufficient focus and attention to details. These data, however, are not supported by those from the test. There might be some reasons for this, which are considered as weaknesses of the study. First, there is not enough training for them on the skill prior to the research. Second, letting them to choose the text of their interest is eventually not fair for them. Some have a long text and others have a short one. Some texts are well-written, and some are blurred. Third, the texts that they chose do not have the same style, organization, and level of difficulty.

From the data analysis and its result, the implication is that a comparison between pre and post-tests might provide more complex data on their skills. Also, the use the same text for all students in the pre and another same text in the post-test should be considered. By referring to the result of the test on the same text, which is given to all respondents for the sake of fairness, it can possibly be found out which aspect of the skill that the learners need to improve. Regarding to the choice of the text, there are a wide range of text might be used in critical reading. Problem solving text seems to be the commonest. Literature text and cross-cultural material may serve to meet the need. Text which offers alternative discourse may also be of choice.

This online critical reading skill is important for the students and having it in this digital era is much more pivotal. They need to improve it and it can be done in and outside the classroom.

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