# CRITICAL THINKING-RELATED CHALLENGES TO ACADEMIC WRITING: A CASE OF INDONESIAN POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS AT A UK UNIVERSITY

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## ABSTRACT

*This research reported Indonesian students' perspectives on challenges in writing a critical academic essay and factors causing those challenges in a university in the UK. It was a qualitative method in nature and used a semi-structured interviewing technique with open-ended questions as the main method for data collection. The results indicate four main problems the participants' encountered in relation to critical thinking realization in their essay writing which include clarity of ideas presented, lack of critical analysis, lack of critical evaluation, and lack of precision. This research also finds three important factors causing those problems of critical thinking realization by the students in their essay writings namely lack critical awareness, lack of understanding of the critical thinking concept, and differences of academic requirements between Indonesian and British context. This research is expectedly useful as an input in the re-design of syllabi and in the improvement of writing instruction that aims to promote especially international Indonesian students' critical thinking in university-level education, in line with properly addressing students' needs and developing CT pedagogy in the site.*

*Keywords: critical thinking, academic writing, international student, British University*

## INTRODUCTION

Some studies have reported a continuously growing number of international students worldwide with more than 2,5 million students. They are from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds studying outside their home countries (Shaheen, 2012; Gichura, 2010; Arkoudis & Tran, 2010; Koernig, 2007). Many of those studies concern international students' experiences in dealing with the higher education system in the English-speaking host countries such as the US (Wang, 2009), the UK (Lasanowski, 2009), Australia (Grayson, 2008; Tran, 2008), New Zealand (Holmes, 2004) and Canada (Tran, 2008; Ridley, 2004) that have also been largely documented. Up until now, the United Kingdom is a country that is reported to be the second most popular destination for international students to continue their studies after the United States (Lillyman & Bennett, 2014; Findlay et al., 2012). More than 435.000 international students are reported to continue their study in various disciplines both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in universities across the UK recently (Sedgley, 2011).

However, entering a new system of education like in British universities is not always easy especially for international students coming from the different educational system (Richmonds, 2007) and a different socio-cultural environment (Yeoh & Terry, 2013). Students from Asian countries like those coming from Indonesia may encounter problems in dealing with the educational system in the UK as they must adjust from memorization of learning to critical thinking of learning tradition (Indah, 2017; Emilia & Hamied, 2015; Tapper, 2004). Many international students from other Asian countries such as China and India find it difficult to deal with critical thinking in writing which has been viewed by some as being exclusive to the Western mode of thinking (Duong, 2005).

Specifically, as other studies reported, Asian students are lacking critical thinking abilities such as in terms of comparing, evaluating, arguing, and presenting the point of views in their writing (Shaheen, 2012, 2016; Fell and Lukianova, 2015). In Indonesian context, Kartikaningsih (2016) has reported that Indonesian students are lack of critical thinking in argumentative texts that they have created for course assignment purposes due to their limited knowledge in both concept of critical thinking and

approaches to apply it into their writing (Junining, 2016; Gustine, 2013; Emilia, 2005).

Meanwhile, Lillis and Turner (2001) have said that higher education in the UK puts students writing at the center of teaching and learning with an emphasis on critical thinking performance. Critical thinking in writing, as she has added, is seen as the way in which students consolidate their understanding of subject areas, as well as a common means by which 'tutors can come to learn about the extent and nature of individual students' understanding (Lillis and Turner, 2001). This clearly shows that the ability to write critically for international students is a must in order to succeed in their study in the British universities (Shaheen, 2012, 2016; Arkoudis & Tran, 2010).

However, a review of the current literature has found no research concerns Indonesian students studying at UK universities in relation to their critical thinking in academic writing. Critical thinking in academic writing, as it is known, has been recognized as a key skill that influences students' success in the UK university level (Shaheen, 2012). Current researches by Indonesian scholars have reported that critical thinking in academic writing is one that is found difficult for most Indonesian students (Kartikaningsih, 2016; Indah, 2017; Gustine, 2018; Emilia, 2005) and challenges in dealing with critical academic writing for assignment purposes might also be encountered by Indonesian students currently studying at the UK universities.

In response to this issue, this small scale research aims to explore six Indonesian postgraduate students' perspectives on challenges in relation to critical thinking in academic writing and factors causing those challenges in applying the critical thinking concepts in their essay writing for their module assignments in one university in Belfast city in the UK. This research is expectedly useful as an input in the re-design of syllabi, and the improvement of writing instruction aims to promote students' critical thinking in university-level education, in line with properly addressing students' needs and developing Critical Thinking (CT) pedagogy in the site.

The United Kingdom is one of many other countries in the West that put one's CT development as its main agenda through its higher education (Vyncke, 2012). Within the higher education system in the UK has been made as to the main aspect of every subject given (Fell & Lukianova, 2015). It is an essential component of students' set of competencies for them to successfully graduate from any degree program (Swatridge, 2014). This commitment is evidenced, for example, in the National Committee of Inquiry in the UK higher education, 1997. This document emphasizes the importance of building inquiry tradition in higher education in the UK. This way, today generations pursuing their study in the British Universities are expected to be able to challenge ideas of the old ones and to own disciplined thinking and high curiosity (Shaheen, 2012, 2016).

Another national document concerned critical thinking skills development in the UK higher education is the Framework of Higher Education Qualifications in the UK (FHEQ, 2008). This document, for example, outlines concisely requirements to fulfill by both undergraduate and postgraduates students. It is stated that the ability to do problem-solving appropriately is vital for undergraduate students. It is also emphasized that students at this level are able to build reliable and coherent argumentations through tasks given by their teachers (Shaheen, 2012, 2016). In addition, the students are also expected to be able to propose alternative solutions to problems and to develop existing skills and to acquire new competencies in order to make sound judgments (FHEQ, 2008). These documents clearly indicate the importance of critical thinking development within the framework of higher education in the UK.

One of the main concerns of most international students studying in English-language country is their mastery of English especially those students are coming from non-English speaking background with such a limited practice of English both spoken and in writing (Yeoh & Terry, 2013; Strauss, 2012; Ramachandran, 2011; Rosenthal, Russel, & Thomson, 2007). It includes those students who are coming from Indonesia that are reported to have almost similar problems (Arsyad, 2013). Rosenthal, Russel, and Thomson (2007) have conducted research that is focusing on the well-being of international students in Australia. It is found that 24% of international students have academic difficulties in written English, while 22% have academic difficulties with spoken English.

Moreover, it has been shown that the lack of English language skills directly impacts international students in terms of their academic performance and social life (Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010). In addition, research is conducted in two universities in the UK by Shaheen (2012) has revealed almost similar challenges faced by international students studying at the British university. She has found that most of these international students have difficulties in expressing their criticality in their academic writing due to their limited abilities and knowledge of English (Shaheen, 2016). In relation to critical thinking, Shaheen has also reported that students' various conceptions of critical thinking which differ from that in British culture are the result of the cultural specificity which is different from one that is understood in the UK educational system. This has been the main reason why many international students underperform when it comes to writing assignments such as essays, dissertations, and theses (Tsui, 2008; Halpern, 2004; Lipman, 1995).

Davies (2006) has said that many international students face such a problem in academic writing not only because of their insufficient abilities in English but because writing a piece of academic writing itself is a complex activity. He has further said that this happens due to students' lack of experiences in their native backgrounds in terms of writing critical academic writing. Ramachandran (2011) has contended that international students may find it easy to write with a well-structured and grammatically correct English but may lack rigor. In addition, Egege and Kutieleh (2004) have reported an interesting finding that South East Asian students mostly find it very difficult to express their critical thinking in their academic writing such as in terms of lacking arguments, having a lack of clarity and criticality, and being descriptive in nature despite they are very good mastery of English. This occurs because in some cases, a good piece of writing can be argued poorly and being critical is related more to logical reasoning than language (Egege & Kutieleh, 2004). Another research concludes that Asian international students are considered to be passive due to a lack of understanding of the requirements of analysis and critique due to their cultural background (Richmonds, 2007; Tapper, 2004).

It is aforementioned that being critical and analytical in students' thinking is the main requirement to succeed in many academic disciplines in the UK higher education system (Shaheen, 2012). However, some researches have reported that many international students find it difficult

to put their critical thinking in their academic writing (Shaheen, 2012; Knoch et al., 2015). This occurs due to their different cultural backgrounds which at the same time are obliged to adapt to an unfamiliar learning approach. Most of those international students are incapable of answering analytically, not only because of the demands of writing in a foreign language but also because these students do not actually know what it is to make their own point. In addition, they also find it unfamiliar to create their own meanings in analytical ways. Further, the differences in expectations between international (non-Western) students and their faculties are also important issues which deserve considerable attention (Shaheen, 2012).

Research focusing on finding out international students' perspectives have reported the importance of support from tutors in their learning (Kingston & Forland, 2007; Tran, 2008). In terms of academic writing, the research has also reported that tutors' feedback on their writing are valuable and are preferred by the students to help them improve their academic writing abilities and skills (Kingston & Forland, 2007). Tran (2008) has said that students involved in his study valued the dialogues established between them and their tutors. Particularly those conversations aim to increase their understandings of the academic expectations on specific assignments and to engage as active participants in disciplinary practices.

Referring to the western logical convention, theorists like Davis (2003) has concluded that the principles involve in critical thinking and argumentation at university level need to be taught explicitly. He argues that it is important that critical thinking skills are taught explicitly in order to help students develop their abilities in writing essays, papers, and dissertations which demand such high critical thinking. Ballard and Clanchy (1991) have reported that students from non-western countries often have difficulties with analytical writing. They have said that those students also consider that the precise nature of their writing is description rather than analysis. This research has also reported that even intelligent and highly educated students encounter problems in dealing with academic writing in British universities context. In this case, Hammond and Gao (2002) have contended that a big gap has been found between the Asian and western education systems in terms of the requirements, philosophies, standards, and conceptions of knowledge (Tweed & Lehman, 2002).

In the Indonesian context, critical thinking has been a buzzword especially after the Reform Era in 1998 which was signed by people's demands for freedom of expressions as citizens (Emilia, 2010). Indonesia needs more figures of critical thinkers in order to support the country's future development (Indah, 2017). Therefore today developing citizen critical thinking through education has also been the main agenda of Indonesian education (Kartikaningsih, 2016). In the Indonesian educational context, it is argued that referring to the international benchmark of education, the 3R basic literacy (reading, writing, and arithmetic) is not enough. This, Indah (2017) has said, needs to be completed into 4R basic competencies (reading, writing, arithmetic, and reasoning). This is important in order to equip the young generation with skills needed to support their life in the future.

However, some researches have reported that Indonesian students' critical thinking still need further attention for development because Indonesian students' critical thinking is still far lag behind their counterparts in other neighboring countries such as Singapore and Malaysia. This calls for a more comprehensive critical pedagogy in order to boost students' critical thinking (Gustine, 2013) including through teaching critical writing such as argumentative texts (Kartikaningsih, 2016; Emilia, 2010, 2005).

## METHODS

This research is a qualitative method in nature. Focusing on its method, Lincoln and Denzin (1994) have defined qualitative research as, "Research that is multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter." In this present research, the focus is on the perspectives of six Indonesian students studying at the master program of TESOL in one university in the city of Belfast, the UK especially in dealing with challenges in writing an academic essay critically as required by the module tutors. This qualitative research focuses on smaller numbers of people participating in this research, yet the data offer detailed and rich information regarding the participants (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008).

This present research uses a semi-structured interviewing technique with open-ended questions as the main method for data collection. Scholars argues that semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions are a flexible approach, which allows the researcher to capture various and complex issues related to individuals' perceptions and experiences (Freebody, 2003; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2013; Patton, 1990) which in this research refers to six Indonesian postgraduate students' perspectives on critical thinking in the context of academic writing written for their assignments. This type of interview is used in this research because it is able to develop ideas widely relevant to the issues under research (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2013). Finally, the use of the semi-structured interviews in the present research makes it possible for the researcher to follow up unexpected results and consume less time than other kinds of interviews, such as unstructured interviews (Patton, 1990).

Six Indonesian who are studying in the TESOL postgraduate program in the School of Social Sciences Education and Social Work are involved. These six participants are two male and four female students in the first semester of their study. Three criteria of participants' selections are; (1) graduate students in a UK university from Indonesia; (2) have experiences of writing essays as module assignments; and (3) encountering problems related to CT issues in writing are used in this research. The similarities between these six participants are the facts that they meet all the three criteria. These participants have gained experiences writing for assignments purposes so that they both have perspectives on those processes of writing up essays in which critical thinking is highly emphasized. They both are doing essay writings as part of their assignments and express their willingness to fully participate in this research as they could express what they think about this issue in academic writing context in the postgraduate program they attach.

These six students are chosen based on purposive random sampling in that the characteristics of these students meet the purpose of this research, i.e., they are students from Indonesia studying at the UK university and they have problems in dealing with critical thinking issues in their academic writing. These criteria are important in order to investigate in depth their challenges as well as factors

causing their problems in dealing with academic writing they do for their assignments purposes.

To follow Kumar (2005), data from the interviews are analyzed by using the thematic analysis approach. In this context, all responses from the interviews conducted were clustered under each question given during the interview sessions with the six participants involved in this study. Thus, emerging themes were identified and coded accordingly. All these results of the analysis were then further described and used as quoted data during the writing up sessions. All these analyses of the data are conducted manually without using any analysis software such as QSR Nudist or N-Vivo. This is done to ensure that the issues explored in the data could be thoroughly understood. In terms of validity issue, triangulation is conducted by referring data to the main theory of critical thinking used in this research and through member checks by having the transcripts 'sent back' (Kvale, 1996) to the participants who have been interviewed to make sure that the results are appropriate with their responses given by them.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The six participants of this research indicate that as international students, they have found four main challenges in dealing with critical essay writing for their assignments purposes. These four problems include important aspects of critical thinking in writing as proposed by Chaffee (2002) namely clarity of ideas presented, lack of critical analysis, lack of critical evaluation, and lack of precision.

Firstly, one of the challenges the participants have said about critical thinking issue in terms of writing is the lack of clarity of ideas in their essay which is a significant theme within the data. It is a challenge for the participants to write with clear ideas due to English barriers and lack of understanding and skills in terms of academic writing skills in English. Fa, one of the participants, has said that it is difficult for them to create a good argument and clarify ideas, as in,

> "Anytime I write an essay for my assignment, my problem would be on making myself clear in my writing. I mean, it is hard for me to make my ideas clear and easy for my tutor to understand as he/she commonly writes as feedback on my paper. Well, may be because I am still lacking with English academic vocabularies." (Fa)

This statement by Fa coincides with the views of Facione (1990) which emphasizes the lack of ability to clarify meanings, purposes, ideas, and information as the most difficult part in writing an essay (Lillis and Turner, 2001) and has been a main problem of many international students from Asian countries (Campbell & Li, 2008; Tsui, 2008; Barkley, Cross, & Major, 2004); Duong, 2005; Mehdizadeh & Scott, 2005). Similarly, Shaheen (2012) has also argued that international students mostly find it difficult to make clear of ideas in their writing. She has added that in weaker pieces of writing of the international students she has studied, arguments are usually provided by the students with little explanation or even without explanation at all. One of which is caused by the fact that they still encounter problems with their academic English.

Secondly, giving voices through critical analysis is another main problem as said by the participants. In the academic writing context, critical analysis is essential as it is required in order to meet the standard of academic writing per se (Facione, 1990). As Facione (1990) has further stated, in order to analyze critically, students will need to be able to organize ideas in their writing critically in such a systematic and logical way. Students admit that the ability to critically analyze and to show their critical voices are so much challenging to do as found in Pien has said,

> "My tutor always said the importance of voices and critical analysis in the academic writing as also I read in the handbook of the module. But still, I find it really hard to do." (Pien)

This difficulty in providing critical voices may be an impact of their culture as many reported by previous researches (e.g., Shaheen, 2012, 2016; Russell et al., 2009; Hammond & Gao, 2002). Research by Russell et al. (2009) has reported that international students that are studying at the UK universities have found it difficult to show their critical voice in their writing. It is due to their home culture and/or past education experiences which do not train them with such expressions of voices (Russell et al., 2009) that is very typical of the western culture of education (Lillis and Turner, 2001).

Finally, critical evaluation is another problem as found in the results of interviews with the participants. This critical evaluation is defined as the process of weighing up the strengths and weaknesses of a logical argument, or the robustness of evidence supporting an argument or theory, or the extent to which evidence does actually support the argument (Paul & Elder, 2006). Referring to this definition, it is expected that any piece of academic writing written by the students are highly relevant to the themes given and logically organized based on those themes. In relation to this critical evaluation issue in writing, the two participating students have said that they have problems in terms of assessing arguments, ideas, claims or assumptions, and also with comparing the strengths and weaknesses of different perspectives. As it is reported by Fa,

> "I find it hard to argue critically of theories I am using in my writing. I do not know how to evaluate arguments from other sources I used. It is hard." (Fa)

Another student, Pien, has said that it is hard for him to do a compare and contrast of ideas regarding a certain topic that he writes, as he said: "compare and contrast of ideas relevant to my studies is one of the hardest parts in writing, I have to say that." The fact that the students are not able to do compare and contrast very well in their academic writing is also influenced by their previous education experience in their home country, Indonesia. According to them, even in writing skills class, the lecturer asks students to do more group presentations about writing rather than asks the students to write and provided feedback which is similar to a case in another Asian context in which oral presentation and examination are used by lecturers for assessment of the modules (Yeoh and Terry, 2013).

In terms factors causing students' challenges in dealing with the critical essay writing, results of interview analysis indicate four main causes namely lack of critical thinking awareness, lack of understanding the critical thinking concept, differences of academic requirements between native and non-native context, and insufficient English language abilities.

In the first place, the lack of awareness in terms

of critical thinking in the context of writing is one of the important factors causing students' problems in dealing with critical thinking. It is found in this study that the lack of critical awareness is caused by the students' previous educational background in Indonesia which according to them put less concern on critical thinking especially in academic writing context than in the university in the UK where they currently study. Dri, another participants, has said,

"I have no experience in doing something called critical writing. Even if what I did in my previous study in Indonesia was critical writing or something I just did not know because my lecturer never told me."

The lack of awareness in dealing with critical thinking in writing is also expressed by Sari, another participant of this research. She has said that she has never taught something called critical thinking or critical writing so that she found these terms even new to her.

All the six participating students have also mentioned their previous educational experience in Indonesia which do not put critical thinking as the main purpose of the assignments. Sari has said,

"The critical thinking issue is very new to me because when I was at my undergraduate degree my teacher did not emphasise critical thinking in the assignments they gave to us. They just asked us to have a classroom presentation."

All these findings clearly indicate that previous educational experiences influence students' awareness as well as the understanding of critical thinking (Shaheen, 2012; Berno & Ward, 2002) especially in the context of writing (Russell et al., 2009).

The second issue revealed in the data analyzed is the two Indonesian students' lack of understanding of the critical thinking concept as it is expected by the university in general and the tutor in particular. This lack of familiarity with critical thinking notion is considered a barrier for these students to apply critical thinking in their writing for assignments especially in the form of critical essay writing. Pien has said,

"I don't understand what it actually required from my writing. It is said that as a student here we are expected to write critically, but what it is expected to do by us is not explained or demonstrated clearly by the tutors."

This statement by the participant correlates with Shaheen's (2012) findings that most of the international students involved in her research think it to be difficult to apply the critical thinking concept in their writing assignments especially essay writing.

The third factor is relating to the participants' culture. Scholars have long argued that culture influences students' critical thinking and this has been one of the main barriers for the students from other cultures. Like two participating students in this research, they find it difficult to deal with critical thinking as applied in academic assignments such as essay and paper writing (Shaheen, 2012). Shaheen (2012) has contended that students from non-western educational culture would not be easily able to write academically. This idea is similar to what is found in this research that culture has been one main barrier for the student to be able to write critically as said by Pien,

"I am not so much encouraged to stay different from most people in general in terms of ideas or something. I am not used to be encouraged to think critically in this case."

Another student, Tia, has said,
"I think it is so much different between my previous background education and the education here in the UK. For example, when it came to writing assignment, my teacher used to focus on the quantity rather than the quality of writing."

All these clearly show that although writing is the hallmark of UK higher education, conventions and standards vary between different cultures (Lillis & Turner, 2001). Consequently, international Indonesian students studying at the UK university that involved in this research face challenges in applying CT skills in their academic writing.

Finally, the students have said that it is their English which causes them not to be able to put clearly their critical thinking in their writing which is experienced by most international students studying in English-language country (Yeoh and Terry, 2013). Fa has said that she has a problem with technical vocabularies and expressions that show criticality in her writing. In addition to this, she has also said that it is not only about language proficiency itself but on how to structure ideas using the language. She has said, "I studied English since I was in my primary education; for me, the issue is not the language proficiency but how to structure ideas with my English." This finding correlates with Kabilan's idea (2000) that it is not only a matter of language proficiency when one comes into writing issue but also on how structuring ideas with critical thinking are applied in it (Atkinson, 1997). In addition, Shaheen (2012) has reported that international students in the UK universities have weak foundations of English so that their critical thinking development is considered poor as it is reflected in their writings. Meanwhile, as Paul and Elder (2006) have argued that a strong relationship between positive performance in thinking and writing do exist. According to them, it is critical writing that represents' one's critical thinking but not with the descriptive one.

All in all, these illustrated findings are in line with what Barkley, Cross, and Major (2004) have said about non-western students coming to study in western universities. They have reported that international students, especially those coming from Asia, find it challenging to adjust with the western culture where questioning, criticizing, refuting, arguing, debating, and persuading are the common learning features as they would also do in their writing practice (Shaheen, 2012). Moreover, other researches have also mentioned the factors that influence students' cultural adaptation (Campbell & Li, 2008; Mehdizadeh & Scott, 2005), such as previous learning experiences, cultural values and beliefs, motivation and language skills (Berno & Ward, 2002) which bring direct implications to their practice of academic writing (Shaheen, 2012).

Given the fact that critical thinking in the writing context is important. It is then urgent for especially university lecturers in Indonesia to explicitly teach both critical thinking concepts and disposition in order to support students' improvement CT and at the same time prepare

them to study in countries such as the United Kingdom which put CT in writing context is not only important but necessary.

## CONCLUSIONS

This research has found four main problems the participants' encountered in relation to CT realization in their essay writing including clarity of ideas presented, lack of critical analysis, lack of critical evaluation, and lack of precision. This research has also found four important factors causing those problems of critical thinking realization by the students in their essay writings. The very first problem is related to the fact that they own a lack of critical awareness that is caused by the students' previous educational background in Indonesia which according to them put less concern on critical thinking. Other factors are related to their lack of understanding of the critical thinking concept as it is expected by the university in general and the tutor in particular. Other two factors are relating to differences in academic requirements between Indonesian and British context and insufficient English language ability.

Finally, apart from its limited number of participants and its focus to only a specific group of international students, this research would be useful to enrich the current body of knowledge. In that, the results could help to reveal difficulties in writing critically among Indonesian students and could be used as an input in the re-design of syllabi. Moreover, in the improvement of writing instruction, it aims to promote especially international Indonesian students' critical thinking in university-level education, in line with properly addressing students' needs and developing CT pedagogy in the site. Using mixed-method, future research could further investigate international students' perception of potential programs that can help them to understand and apply CT concepts and skills in their writing.

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