

# Students' Critical Thinking in Writing An English Exposition Text

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**Abstract** - This study was aimed at investigating elements of critical thinking demonstrated by students in writing an English exposition text. Further, it was intended to find out students' opinion about critical thinking reflected in their essays. A qualitative research design, particularly a case study, was employed. The data of students' texts which were analyzed by using the critical thinking theory proposed by Reichenbach (2001), Ennis (1996), and Chaffee *et al* (2002) indicated that students were able to utilize all aspects of critical thinking. However, they still need guidance in expressing effective and sound arguments. Moreover, the result of interview indicated that students lack critical thinking knowledge. Therefore, they suggested critical thinking and written composition should be taught and combined into an integrated activity.

**Keywords:** Critical Thinking, English Exposition Text, Writing.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Many experts have suggested that teaching English should be developed to foster students' critical thinking because it (1) enables the students to understand the hidden truth and to uncover the essence of a message (Alwasilah, 2001, p. 65); and (2) improves not only students learning in EFL but also critical capacities (Emilia, 2005, p. 276). Since a number of current issues that addressed in classroom demand critical thinking, students are encouraged to express their points of view openly (Brown, 2001, p. 444). Parallel to the consensus aforementioned, other experts have also necessitated the practice of critical thinking that should be taught effectively in the classroom (Suherdi, 2012, p. 18; Reichenbach, 2001; Crawford *et al*, 2005; Weil & Anderson, 2000; Kagan, 1999; Brookfield, 1987; Browne & Keeley, 2007).

The definitions of critical thinking in the study have been shaped by many experts of critical thinking movement such as (Ennis, 1996, p. xvii; Chaffee *et al*, 2002, p. 364; Paul & Elder, 2007; Reichenbach, 2001, p. 19). First, critical thinking is considered as a process to achieve the aim of producing a reasonable decision about what is to believe and what is to do (Ennis, 1996, p. xvii). Second, critical thinking pertains to a well-organized commitment to evaluate critically and to determine whether judgment about the truth of claim or recommendation to act in certain way should be accepted, rejected, or suspended (Chaffee *et al*, 2002, p. 364; Reichenbach, 2001, p. 19). Third, applied to thinking, critical thinking is defined as thinking that explicitly aims at well-founded judgment and hence utilizes appropriate evaluative standards in the attempt to determine the true worth, merit, or value of something (Paul & Elder, 2007).

As discussed by several experts, elements of critical thinking can be identified in writing an English Exposition

Text (Browne & Keeley, 2007, p. 15; Chaffee *et al*, 2002, p. 469, 480; Ennis, 1996, p. 4; Inch *et al*, 2007, p. 9; Paul & Elder, 2007, p. 21; Reichenbach, 2001; Toulmin, 2003, p. 11; and Crusius & Channel, 2003, p. 48). Of all elements, a number of critical thinking elements that include issue, claims (thesis), argument, reasons, data (evidence), and opinion are the main facets of critical thinking which shape the present study. These elements are used based on the ideas of Chaffee *et al* (2002, p. 469, 480), Ennis (1996, p. 4), and Reichenbach (2001).

Another aspects of critical thinking is critical thinking standards which consist of (1) *clarity* in arguments, (2) *logical* and *relevance* of data and evidence used to the main point, (3) *accuracy* of the quality of the arguments, and (4) *precision* in the sense of being specific about detail (Chaffee *et al*, 2002, p. 469; Emilia, 2005, p. 25; Paul & Elder, 2007, p. 21). By referring to Chaffee *et al* (2002, p. 159) and Ennis (1996, p. 7), clarity means a conceptualization of what you want to say by utilizing the best or proper use of language. The next core of clarity is logical and relevance in presenting the reasoning that contains evidence. This means that the use of cohesive device including reference (Eggs, 2004) is crucial in order to result in well-explained information. Also, it is used by writer to express and create a logical relationship between texts in paragraph (Eggs, 2004, p. 105). The logical relationship is realized by linking statements in the form of phrases to introduce an informative statement (Swales & Feak, 2008, p. 122). A nominalization is also utilized to produce a sound argument, to indicate a text as a written discourse (Gerot & Wignell, 1994, p. 147), and to realize the audience of the text what the purposes of exposition text as a type of argumentative writing are.

Another element of intellectual standard is accuracy. The accuracy of argument can be shown by using the available evidence which indicates that belief is true (Chaffee *et al*, 2002, p. 364, and Paul & Elder, 2007, p. 10). Meanwhile, a precise thinking (precision) and writing resulted from clarity can avoid the vague and the use of general words (Browne & Keeley; 2007; Chaffee *et al*, 2002, p. 159; and Ennis, 1996, p. 7).

What proficient critical thinkers are disposed to have is a combination of attitudes and tendency to act or think in a certain way at the right time with the right commitments as claimed by Alwasilah (2004, p. 165), Ennis (1996, p. 9), Reichenbach (2001, p. 14), and Ritchart & Perkins (2005, p. 785). In other word, they are disposed to: (1) try to be well-informed and clear about the intended meaning of what is written, seek reasons to represent and defend a position, and mention or refer to them, take into account the total situation

or context when they interpret something and keep their thinking relevant and focus on the main point and avoid going off on tangents (Ennis, 1996, p. 9; Reichenbach, 2001, p. 14); (2) have a sound decision, a rational control of beliefs, inferences which entail a commitment to analyze and evaluate beliefs based on reason and evidence, and to believe and conform rationally (Paul & Elder, 2007, p. 17); and (3) think well when they think and also think at the right times with the right commitments- the truth and evidence, creativity and perspective taking, sound decisions, and apt solutions (Ritchart & Perkins, 2005, p. 785).

However, there is an aspect that should be avoided by a proficient critical thinker. Fallacy is one aspect of critical thinking which is not meaningful, irrelevant, and useless, for critical thinkers although they are able to make arguments persuasively to audiences as claimed by Browne & Keeley (2007, p. 83), Chaffee, (2000, p. 453), Chaffee et al (2002, p. 300), Ennis (1996, p. 381), Inch et al (2006, p. 81), and Reichenbach (2001, p. 265). The fallacy in this study is focused on (1) two of ambiguity fallacies: equivocation (an incorrect conclusion is drawn based on ambiguity of meaning) and amphiboly (incorrect conclusion is drawn based on evidence presented in a syntactically ambiguous way (Reichenbach, 2001, p. 289); and (2) irrelevant reasoning which does not state at least two premises (Chaffee et al, 2002, p. 504; Emilia, 2005, p. 26; Reichenbach, 2001, p. 321).

Recalling critical thinking leads students to a higher level thinking (Reichenbach, 2001; Kagan, 1999; Weil & Anderson, 2000), to have their own reasoning and decisions (Crawford et al, 2005; Ennis, 1996, p. xvii), and to become more self-reliant (Browne & Keeley, 2007), study emphasizes critical thinking in writing an English exposition text is worth conducting. The reasons are that 1) exposition text is a type of genre text that is taught in writing class in a tertiary level; 2) it needs a complex skill/ thinking (Westwood, 2008, p. 56, p. 57); 3) higher-level thinking and ability to synthesize information (Chaffee et al, 2002); 4) it is as "a means to convey ideas of our own" (Reichenbach, 2001, p. 213), and also 6) it is useful to judge critical thinking (Chaffee, 2000; Chaffee et al, 2002; Lipman, 2003 in Emilia, 2010, p. 4).

There are two research results deal with the implementation of critical thinking from Indonesia (Emilia, 2005) and Philippine (Flores, 2007). Since the study of critical thinking in writing an exposition text is still rare and as it is worth conducting; this research is conducted to fulfil the intention and thus the research aims to investigate the elements of critical thinking in writing an English exposition text and to find out the students' opinions about critical thinking in writing an English exposition text.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative design which used a method of case study. Participants of the research (who were determined purposively and were between 21-22 years of age) were six semester eight students of English Department

of Education in a private university in West Java. They had accomplished the subject of writing (Writing I to IV); they were considered capable of giving the adequate data (Sugiyono, 2005, p. 54). Furthermore, six students were chosen based on their GPA (IPK/ *Indeks Prestasi Kumulatif*) rather than gender: two students were from low achiever (GPA<3), two students were from mid achiever (GPA 3-3.5), and two students were from high achievers (GPA> 3.5). This was done because critical thinking was supported by the intelligence which was in line with what was said by Wade & Tavris (2007, p. xxix). The study utilized several techniques in collecting the data, namely text document of students' exposition texts and interviews.

## 3. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

### a. Analysis of Exposition Texts Written by Students

The text documents of exposition texts written by students showed that the elements of critical thinking have been demonstrated by students. There were arguments, issue, thesis, reason and conclusion, and evidence to support the thesis. Moreover, these texts followed the critical thinking standards: *relevance* (Chaffee et al, 2002, p. 469; Emilia, 2005, p. 25; Paul & Elder, 2007, p. 21). The structure of the texts were relevant to the rule of exposition text proposed by the experts (Emilia, 2005, p. 60; Derewianka, 1990, p. 70); it covered thesis elements, series of arguments, and restatement of thesis elements. Below is the example of the text document written by mid-achiever.

Table 1: Text document (written by mid achiever)

Title	<b>Parents Should Control the Use of Internet by Teenagers</b>
Thesis	<p><b>Paragraph 1:</b></p> <p>1. We know that, from internet, we can get many information what (that) we need to fulfil our assignment in office or in the school; for example about knowledge, life, community, love, work, etc.</p> <p>2. We can get them easily from internet.</p> <p>3. But there are many damage (bad effects) of internet especially for teenagers which (so that) parents should control the use of internet by teenagers.</p>
Argument	<p><b>Paragraph 2:</b></p> <p>4. The first, the damage (bad effect) of internet is free sex.</p> <p>5. In modern era, many students do free sex everywhere because of internet.</p> <p>6. They can easily open sites about sex; for example: pictures or video about sex.</p> <p>7. They can get information about sex without asking his parents or the other family or friend.</p> <p><b>Paragraph 3:</b></p> <p>8. The second, the damage (bad effect) of internet is fake.</p> <p>9. We know that, now, there are many social media which is used by people such as facebook, tweeter, instagram, etc</p> <p>10. They enjoy using this social media for communication with the others.</p> <p>11. Hence, there are many fake from internet especially social media; for example robbery, hypnotist, until take (taking) much money from their sacrifice (victim) easily.</p>
Restatement of Thesis	<p>12. In conclusion, there are many damage (bad effects) of internet especially for teenager such as free sex and fake.</p> <p>13. All of them are found without pay attention from our (their) parents or the other family.</p> <p>14. So, parents should control the use of internet by teenagers because character of parents for teenagers is so important and children also need it.</p>

Overall, the texts showed the student's critical thinking dispositions which are related to writing. It was shown as they were asked to write exposition text with the topics written in the writing prompt. Also, they showed their attitude and tendency to do this task in the right time and the right activity (Alwasilah, 2004, p. 165; Ennis, 1996, p. 9; Reichenbach, 2001, p. 14; and Ritchart & Perkins, 2005, p. 785). It meant that they wrote argumentative essay properly in about 60 minutes as proposed by the researcher and followed the generic structure of argumentative essay, in particular, exposition. Accordingly, they offered reason and

evidence to support the thesis; and sought reason to defend a position. However, critical thinking standards and disposition demonstrated by students were weakened by the frequent use of fallacies and the use of improper words or expressions (*less clarity*) as can be seen in bracket of Document Text (Table 1). Consequently, many arguments were not sound and credible.

By focusing on this Text 1.2 (mid achiever), there was a little difference in this text (comparing to low and high achiever). In terms of well-explained information, the writer of Text 1.2 did it better than the writer of Text 1.1 (low achiever). Meanwhile, Text 1.3 (high achiever) had less faulty and the writer elaborated information about the issue well. There were similarity among them; they did not use much credible resource (Reichenbach, 2001, p. 14; Paul & Elder, 2007, p. 17; Ritchart & Perkins, 2005, p. 785) to support their thesis. To sum up, the student's critical thinking dispositions are still poor or underdeveloped and require improvement; they coincide with the result of interview.

#### b. The Results of Interview

The interview questions consist of seven questions dealing with 1) what they know about the term "critical thinking"; 2) the essential elements of critical thinking; 3) critical thinking standards; 4) critical thinking disposition; 5) argumentative essay and exposition text; 6) potential values of critical thinking in writing an English argumentative essay; 7) whether or not they have a sufficient knowledge about critical thinking in writing an English text; and 8) students' recommendation for enhancing the critical thinking ability in writing an English exposition text. Subsequently, the interview questions above were represented into central theme consisted of 1) students' understanding of the concept of critical thinking; 2) students' understanding of argumentative essay; 3) students' awareness of potential values of critical thinking in writing an English exposition text; and 4) students' recommendations of critical thinking development. Below is the interpretation of data from individual interview.

First, the students' definitions of the concept of critical thinking were consistent with those suggested by experts such as Ennis (1996, p vii) and Reichenbach (2001, p. 19) who defined critical thinking as a process, the goal of which is to make reasonable decisions about what to believe and what to do; and a careful deliberate determination, reasonable decision to examine our believe critically, accept or reject judgment (ibid). They were able to elaborate the elements of critical thinking such as argument, issue, opinion, reason, evidence, and critical thinking standards such as *relevance* and *clarity*. However, the writer of Text 1.1 (the low achiever) who could not verbalize the term of critical thinking disposition answered directly by saying "*I do not know about the term*". This is also in line with her text as the most underdeveloped text collected in this study due to the frequent use of fallacy such as amphiboly and equivocation.

Second, the students were able to elaborate the concept of argumentative essay, in particular, exposition text. They claimed that argumentative essay attempted to persuade

and convince the readers to accept someone's opinion. Their answers were in line with Brink-Budgen (2000, p. 9) who argued that "an argument in critical thinking was an attempt to persuade someone that one position was more preferable than another". Overall, it is clear that the students were able to elaborate the term of argumentative essay although all participants could not recognize the deeper or detailed information about argumentative essay, in particular, exposition text. However, their result of writing was worth appreciation.

Third, the students were aware of the beneficial values of critical thinking in writing an English argumentative essay, in particular, exposition text. They argued that their critical thinking ability was stimulated through writing activity so that they could explore their flow of ideas, and *vice versa*. Furthermore, writing facilitated and conveyed the problem to be solved together.

Fourth, the students recommended reading many of sources to stimulate critical thinking ability and listen to assorted information, and writing practice to make their own ideas or points of view. In addition, reading the concept of critical thinking was also recommended because writing and critical thinking support each other. Also, they recommended critical thinking to be taught separately in the writing course. The result of interview represented all students' obstacles in this study which is in contrary with Flores (2002) and Fliegel & Holland (2007) whose participants were not under EFL context. It was quite reasonable and it was coherent with the result of students' texts document in general since their texts did not express effective and sound argument. The reason was that some language fallacies occurred in all texts in this study, such as *amphiboly* and *equivocation*. So, it was not surprised that the result of student's essay were underdeveloped and less valuable due to the ambiguity in using language.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The study has clearly shown that critical thinking in writing English exposition text is worth conducting due to its beneficial values. Through the English exposition text, critical thinking aspects consisting of elements of critical thinking, critical thinking standards, and critical thinking disposition can be examined. Yet, the students' text documents suggest that students still need improvement in producing a sound argument; it can be seen from the fallacies they made. This is arguable since, as revealed by the result of students' interview, the ability to use English as foreign language has become a constraint in conveying the ultimate argument. Thus, not only do the student aware of the importance of reading a lot but they also are eager to study critical thinking either separated from or combined with writing activity.

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