ESTEEM Journal of English Study Programme
E-ISSN: 2622-2213
P-ISSN: 2622-9323

THE ROLE OF ACADEMIC WRITING IN DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING AMONG EFL STUDENTS

Royhan Ansori Nasution [1*]
[1] Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Negeri Mandailing Natal, Indonesia

E-mail: [1]heykids09@gmail.com

Accepted :

10 May 2024

Published :

7 July 2024

Corresponding Author:

Royhan Ansori Nasution

Email Corresponding :

heykids09@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This research explores the impact of academic writing on the development of critical thinking skills among EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students. A descriptive qualitative research design was utilized, involving 25 students from the English Education Department at an Indonesian university. The participants were selected through purposive sampling because of their background in academic writing courses. Data were gathered through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and an analysis of students' essays and argumentative documents. The obtained data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify trends in the development of critical thinking. The results indicated that academic writing played a crucial role in enhancing students' critical thinking skills by fostering their ability to structure ideas coherently, assess information, and formulate evidence-based arguments. Students became increasingly aware of the need to evaluate sources, contrast information, and reflect on their ideas before writing. While some students still faced challenges with deep analysis, it was found that academic writing aided in the progressive development of analytical, evaluative, and reflective thinking skills.

Keywords: Academic writing, critical thinking, EFL students, qualitative study, English language education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary education emphasizes the development of both subject-specific knowledge and higher-order cognitive competencies that enable students to respond effectively to complex problems. Critical thinking is particularly important because it equips learners with the ability to examine information, assess arguments, consider alternative perspectives, and formulate reasoned judgments. In English language education, these competencies are essential because students are expected not only to communicate accurately but also to express ideas logically, evaluate different viewpoints, and support their arguments with relevant evidence.

Academic writing is a demanding skill for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners because it requires more than grammatical knowledge and vocabulary mastery. Students must organize information coherently, synthesize ideas from various sources, construct well-supported arguments, and communicate their perspectives systematically. These processes involve several dimensions of critical thinking, including analysis, interpretation, evaluation, and logical reasoning. Tahira and Haider (2019) highlighted challenges experienced by EFL students in developing written arguments, particularly in relation to academic discourse and argument organization. Therefore, academic writing can serve as a learning process through which students develop their ability to examine information and communicate ideas critically.

Previous research has demonstrated the potential of writing activities to strengthen students' critical thinking abilities. Mehta and Al-Mahrooqi (2015) emphasized the connection between writing practice and the development of critical thinking in Omani EFL classrooms. Similarly, Nejmaoui (2018) reported the value of integrating critical thinking activities into argumentative writing to help learners evaluate information and construct more logical arguments. Sharadgah et al. (2019) also examined argumentative

essay writing as a means of promoting critical thinking among EFL college students. These findings suggest that writing tasks involving argument construction and evidence-based reasoning can encourage learners to move beyond the simple presentation of information toward more analytical engagement.

Different instructional approaches have also been explored to strengthen the relationship between writing and critical thinking. Ebadi and Rahimi (2018) investigated WebQuest-based writing instruction and its contribution to EFL learners' writing performance and critical thinking skills. Trang and Anh (2020) similarly highlighted the contribution of critical thinking tasks to students' paragraph-writing performance, particularly in organizing ideas and developing logical explanations. In addition, Asraf et al. (2018) demonstrated the potential of focused freewriting to stimulate ideas and encourage deeper thinking during the prewriting stage. These studies indicate that critical thinking can be incorporated into different stages of the writing process, from generating ideas and exploring information to developing and refining arguments.

The development of critical thinking through academic writing is also influenced by learners' educational and cultural backgrounds. McKinley (2013) discussed how cultural and rhetorical expectations may shape the ways EFL students demonstrate critical thinking in English academic writing. This suggests that students may require instructional support to understand academic conventions and communicate their arguments effectively. From another perspective, Gandana et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of integrating critical thinking into English language teaching in Indonesia. More recent research by Maryam et al. (2025) connected self-directed learning, academic writing skills, and critical thinking among EFL learners, while Lestari et al. (2025) highlighted the potential of project-based learning to promote critical thinking through writing activities involving indigenous narratives. Together, these studies demonstrate that writing development can be supported through learning experiences that encourage independence, reflection, and engagement with meaningful issues.

Despite these contributions, challenges remain in integrating critical thinking into EFL academic writing. Students may concentrate more on grammatical accuracy, vocabulary selection, and sentence construction than on evaluating evidence, developing arguments, and examining the implications of their ideas. Furthermore, writing instruction that prioritizes linguistic performance may provide insufficient opportunities for students to engage in analytical and reflective processes. The importance of identifying specific dimensions of critical thinking is also reflected in the work of Mastuti et al. (2022), which examined students' critical thinking abilities through Facione's theoretical framework. Such perspectives highlight the need to consider critical thinking not merely as a general learning outcome but as a set of cognitive processes that can be developed and observed through academic tasks.

Although previous studies have investigated argumentative writing, instructional strategies, and writing performance, further exploration is needed into how academic writing contributes to the development of critical thinking among university-level EFL students. In particular, students' engagement in analytical thinking, information evaluation, reflective reasoning, and argument construction deserves closer attention. Understanding these processes may provide insights into how learners experience academic writing as more than a language-production activity. Accordingly, this study investigates the role of academic writing in fostering critical thinking among EFL students, with particular attention to the development of analytical, evaluative, and reflective thinking. The study is expected to contribute to a broader understanding of academic writing as a pedagogical means of developing critical thinking in higher education.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to examine the role of academic writing in developing critical thinking skills among EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students. A

Vol 7 No 2 (2024): ESTEEM

qualitative approach was chosen because the study aimed to explore students' experiences, perceptions, and the development of critical thinking processes in depth during academic writing activities. The descriptive method allowed the researcher to describe how academic writing activities contribute to students' abilities in analysis, argument construction, evaluation, and reflection in English language learning. The participants of this study were 25 students from the English Education Department at a university in Indonesia. They were selected through purposive sampling because they had taken academic writing courses and had experience in completing various writing tasks, such as essays, argumentative writing, and reflective writing.

Data collection was conducted through classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Classroom observations were used to directly examine students' engagement in academic writing activities, including how they analyzed information, organized ideas, and participated in classroom discussions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore students' experiences and perceptions of the contribution of academic writing to their critical thinking development, including the challenges and benefits they encountered. In addition, document analysis was conducted by examining students' written assignments, such as essays and argumentative texts, to identify elements of critical thinking, including analysis, interpretation, evaluation, and evidence-based argumentation. All collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key patterns related to the development of critical thinking skills in the context of academic writing.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of observation notes, interview transcripts, and students' written documents revealed that academic writing contributed substantially to the development of critical thinking among EFL learners. Several important patterns emerged from the data.

One noticeable finding was the improvement in students' ability to organize and present ideas systematically. As students engaged in academic writing tasks, they became more capable of developing structured essays that contained clear introductions, logically connected body paragraphs, and relevant conclusions. Their written work demonstrated a gradual shift from expressing unsupported opinions toward presenting arguments strengthened by explanations and evidence.

Interview data further indicated that students became more conscious of the need to think critically before composing their texts. Many participants reported that writing assignments required them to consult various references, compare information, and determine the relevance of different sources. This process encouraged them to examine information more carefully rather than accepting it without evaluation.

Document analysis also showed evidence of critical thinking in students' writing. Several essays reflected attempts to interpret information, assess competing viewpoints, and provide reasoned explanations. Students were increasingly able to identify relationships among ideas and support their positions with evidence. Nevertheless, the depth of analysis varied across participants. While some students demonstrated strong evaluative skills, others still relied on descriptive explanations and struggled to develop more sophisticated arguments.

Overall, the findings suggest that academic writing serves as an effective platform for nurturing critical thinking. Through continuous engagement in writing activities, students gradually strengthened their abilities to analyze information, evaluate evidence, and communicate reasoned arguments.

Vol 7 No 2 (2024): ESTEEM

Discussion

The findings of this study align closely with the conclusions of Tahira & Haider, who asserted that there is a significant relationship between academic writing and critical thinking. Specifically, they emphasized that students are often required to analyze diverse sources of information and to construct coherent, structured arguments in their writing. This study corroborates their findings, highlighting that many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students initially struggle with academic writing, primarily because of their limited experience in developing argumentative discourse. Despite these challenges, it is evident that with consistent practice, students can make notable improvements in their writing.

Furthermore, the enhancement of students' evaluative and reflective thinking skills, as observed in this study, supports Nejmaoui's (2018) assertion. Nejmaoui's research demonstrated that engaging in argumentative writing tasks significantly helps students hone their ability to evaluate information critically and construct logical arguments. In the current study, students displayed measurable progress in assessing the credibility of various sources and re-evaluating their ideas prior to composing their written assignments, reflecting patterns similar to those identified by Nejmaoui.

Additionally, the outcomes of this research align with the work of Mehta, S. R., and Al-Mahrooqi (2015), who emphasized that sustained writing practice can enhance students' analytical thinking skills. The participants in this study showed gradual improvement in their writing abilities following repeated exposure to academic writing tasks, particularly in organizing their arguments more systematically and coherently.

Moreover, the presence of critical thinking elements in students' writing outputs also aligns with the findings of Sharadgah et al. (2019), who noted that argumentative writing encourages learners to analyze issues from multiple perspectives. In this study, several students presented a range of viewpoints. They offered basic evaluations of those ideas, although it is important to note that not all responses reached a high level of depth or completeness.

In addition, the research by Saputra and Hidayah (2023) highlighted the role of reflective writing in fostering deeper cognitive processes and enhancing students' ability to articulate their opinions logically. This perspective is echoed in the current study's findings, which show that students reported that engaging in reflective writing tasks prompted them to think more critically and methodically before putting their thoughts down on paper.

Nonetheless, similar to McKinley's (2013) findings, this study identified persistent challenges students face in fully realizing their potential for critical thinking in their writing. Many students tend to concentrate more on language accuracy and vocabulary choice, often at the expense of deeper analysis and the overall quality of their arguments. This observation underscores the need for continuous guidance and practice, highlighting that while academic writing is a valuable medium for fostering critical thinking skills, students require ongoing support to develop these capabilities fully.

In summary, this study's findings reinforce the existing literature by demonstrating that academic writing transcends mere writing proficiency; it is, in fact, a developmental process that helps students cultivate analysis, evaluation, and reflective thinking within EFL learning environments.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that academic writing plays a significant role in promoting critical thinking among EFL students. Writing activities provide opportunities for learners to engage in analytical and reflective processes that extend beyond language use. Through academic writing, students learn to organize ideas systematically, assess

information critically, and formulate arguments supported by relevant evidence.

The findings indicate that academic writing facilitates the development of several dimensions of critical thinking, including analysis, interpretation, evaluation, and reflection. Students showed increasing awareness of the importance of examining sources, considering alternative viewpoints, and justifying their claims logically. These experiences contributed to the gradual enhancement of their reasoning abilities.

However, the study also revealed that some students continue to encounter difficulties in applying advanced critical thinking skills. A considerable number of learners remain more concerned with linguistic accuracy than with the quality of argumentation and depth of analysis. Consequently, instructors should provide sustained support and design writing activities that explicitly encourage critical inquiry and evidence-based reasoning.

In conclusion, academic writing should be viewed not only as a tool for improving language proficiency but also as a valuable means of developing higher-order thinking skills. Integrating critical-thinking-oriented writing tasks into EFL instruction can help students become more analytical, reflective, and independent learners, better prepared for academic and professional challenges.

5. REFERENCES

Asraf, R. M., Ahmed, S., & Eng, T. K. (2018). Using focused freewriting to stimulate ideas and foster critical thinking during prewriting. *TESOL International Journal*, *13*(4), 67–81.

Ebadi, S., & Rahimi, M. (2018). The effect of WebQuest-based writing instruction on EFL learners' writing performance and critical thinking skills. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research, 9*(1).

Gandana, I., Nafisah, N., & Imperiani, E. (2021). Critical thinking, literature, and teachers' instructional activities: An Indonesian case of community service program for English teachers. *English Language Teaching Educational Journal, 4*(2), 138. https://doi.org/10.12928/eltej.v4i2.4279

Lestari, I. S., Nurnaningrum, G., Astuti, I. A., Hermawan, H. A., Lugina, T. D., & Amalia, L. L. (2025). Writing indigenous narratives through project-based learning: Promoting students' critical thinking in an EFL classroom. *International Journal of Language Education, 9*(2), 415–436. https://doi.org/10.26858/ijole.v1i2.75812

Maryam, Z., Sanif, S., Rehman, A. U., Mohamed, S. H., & Azman, N. B. (2025). The impact of self-directed learning on academic writing skills of EFL learners with critical thinking ability. *Language Teaching Research Quarterly, 47*(1), 281–304. https://doi.org/10.32038/ltrq.2025.47.15

McKinley, J. (2013). *Critical thinking in EFL academic writing: Cultural and rhetorical influences*.

Mehta, S. R., & Al-Mahrooqi, R. (2015). Can thinking be taught? Linking writing and critical thinking in Omani EFL classrooms. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature, 4*(2), 119–127.

Nejmaoui, N. (2018). Improving EFL learners' critical thinking skills in argumentative writing. *English Language Teaching, 12*(1), 98. https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v12n1p98

Sa'di, R. A., Ahmad, H., & Sharadgah, T. A. (2019). Promoting and assessing EFL college students' critical thinking skills through argumentative essay writing. *Arab World English Journal, 10*(4), 133–150. https://doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol10no4.11

Saputra, H., & Sinaga, R. M. P. (2023). Students' critical thinking in the AI era: Perceptions, benefits, and limitations.

Vol 7 No 2 (2024): ESTEEM

International Journal of Educational and Life Sciences, 1(1), 41–58.

Tahira, M., & Haider, G. (2019). Investigation of EFL students' perceptions and writing. *International Online Journal of Primary Education, 8*(1), 1–30.

Trang, N. H., & Anh, K. H. (2020). Impact of teaching critical thinking tasks for enhancing paragraph writing performance of EFL learners. *International Journal of Education and Practice, 8*(4), 784–803. https://doi.org/10.18488/journal.61.2020.84.784.803