

THE ROLE OF ENGLISH LEARNERS' CRITICAL THINKING IN ACADEMIC ESSAY WRITING

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Abstract: Critical thinking is a key skill for writing well in school, especially for those learning English as a second or foreign language. This study looks at how critical thinking helps these learners improve their essay writing. Researchers used various methods like examining writing samples, conducting surveys, and interviewing students who are at intermediate to advanced levels of English. The study found a strong link between having good critical thinking skills and writing essays that are clear, have strong arguments, and are original. The results suggest that teaching critical thinking can significantly improve academic writing. The study also offers ideas on how teachers can use this information to help students improve their English writing skills.

1. Introduction

Academic writing involves more than just knowing English; it also requires the ability to think clearly, evaluate information, and build logical arguments. For people learning English, this can be especially challenging, as they must become skilled in both the language and the rules of academic writing. Critical thinking is a key skill here, but it's often not discussed as much as it should be.

Lately, there's been a strong focus on teaching higher-level thinking in language education (Benesch, 2001; Halpern, 2014). Critical thinking allows learners to do more than just memorize and repeat ideas. It enables them to reason, combine different ideas, and make their own judgments. These abilities are essential in academic essay writing, which requires discussing various viewpoints, examining evidence, and drawing well-supported conclusions.

This article delves into the impact of critical thinking on the essay writing skills of English learners. It looks specifically at how critical thinking can enhance the clarity and strength of arguments, as well as the depth of analysis in essays. By understanding how important critical thinking is, this study aims to

help develop better teaching strategies for writing in English as a second or foreign language classrooms.

Research Questions

How does having the ability to think critically affect the performance of English learners when writing essays in school? What signs of critical thinking can be seen in the essays written by these students? Which teaching methods best help English learners to develop strong critical thinking skills in their academic writing?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Understanding Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is about thinking in a clear, disciplined way. It means using skills such as forming ideas, applying information, analyzing details, combining knowledge, and evaluating results with skill (Scriven & Paul, 1987). Ennis (1993) highlights that critical thinking involves not only cognitive skills but also qualities like being open to new ideas, being humble about one's knowledge, and being persistent.

Several models have been created to explain critical thinking more clearly. One important model is the Delphi Report by Facione (1990). This report describes six key skills: interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation. These skills are crucial for essay writing because students must understand and explain data, break down and evaluate arguments, judge evidence, and write clear conclusions in their essays.

2.2 Critical Thinking in Second Language Learning

Over the past twenty years, the connection between learning a language and developing critical thinking skills has been studied a lot. Experts like Atkinson and Stapleton say that even though critical thinking is shaped by culture, it can and should be taught in ESL (English as a Second Language) classes. Research shows that students who are taught how to think critically tend to write in a way that is more logical, well-organized, and convincing.

However, some problems remain. People learning a new language might find it challenging to share complex ideas because they don't know enough words or grammar rules. This can make their critical thinking harder to understand. Also, many ESL classes often focus more on making sure that the language is used accurately instead of helping students develop their ideas.

2.3 Academic Essay Writing and Critical Thinking

Writing academic essays means doing things like finding assumptions, checking sources, bringing

different ideas together, and making arguments. All these tasks need critical thinking. Research shows that students with good critical thinking write clearer and more analytical essays (Ku, Ho, Hau, & Lai, 2014; Nussbaum & Schraw, 2007).

However, even though critical thinking is very important, it is often not focused on enough in writing classes for second language learners. It's necessary to understand how critical thinking appears in student essays and find better ways to teach it in schools.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This research employed a mixed-methods design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative data were gathered through standardised critical thinking tests and essay writing assessment. Qualitative data were gleaned from interviews and textual analysis of essays.

3.2 Participants

The participants were 60 intermediate to advanced level ESL students between the ages of 18 and 25 who enrolled in academic English writing courses at a Southeast Asian university. All the participants learned English for at least five years and had experience writing academic essays.

3.3 Instruments

California Critical Thinking Skills Test (CCTST): Used to assess students' critical thinking abilities.

Essay Writing Task: Students wrote a 500-word argumentative essay on a current social issue.

Essay Evaluation Rubric: Derived from IELTS writing criteria, expanded to include markers of critical thinking such as argument clarity, use of evidence, and counterargument consideration.

Semi-Structured Interviews: Conducted with 10 participants to gain an insight into their concept of critical thinking and its application to writing.

3.4 Procedure

The students took the CCTST first. One week later, they handed in an argumentative essay, which was independently graded by two trained raters. Inter-rater reliability was high (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.84$). A subsample of the students was then interviewed.

3.5 Data Analysis

Pearson correlation was used to examine the relationship between CCTST scores and essay quality. Thematic analysis was carried out on the interview transcripts and essay content to identify how critical thinking skills were demonstrated in writing.

4. Results

4.1 Quantitative Findings

Statistical analysis confirmed a significant correlation between critical thinking scores and performance on essays ($r = 0.71$, $p < .001$). Higher critical thinking test scores by students were linked to more organized, convincing arguments, and critically analyzed sources within their essays.

CCTST Score Range	Average Essay Score (out of 20)
60–70	17.4
50–59	15.2
40–49	12.3
Below 40	10.6

4.2 Qualitative Findings

Three themes emerged from the textual and interview analysis:

Theme 1: Depth and Originality of Argument

Essays by high-critical-thinking students were more in-depth, typically with several perspectives and sophisticated reasoning. For instance, one student identified counterarguments before systematically dismantling them with evidence.

Theme 2: Use and Evaluation of Evidence

High-achieving essays not only cited evidence but also critiqued its validity and relevance. Lower-level writers, however, paraphrased sources without evaluation.

Theme 3: Structure and Coherence

Critical thinking was shown in the way students organized their essays. High CCTST scorers formed clear chains of ideas, with apparent transition and cause-effect structure.

These were validated by interview answers. High scorers reported working out the reasons for arguments, questioning sources for credibility, and taking account of other views

5. Discussion

The findings support a positive relationship between critical thinking and the academic writing performance of English learners. This is in agreement with previous studies that critical thinking facilitates the generation of clear, analytical, and persuasive essays (Stapleton, 2001; Ku et al., 2014).

5.1 Pedagogical Implications

The results emphasize the importance of writing pedagogy specifically aimed at enhancing critical thinking. Strategies can include:

Instruction on argumentative frameworks and fallacies.

Incorporating Socratic questioning and debates.

By means of writing prompts which demand evaluative and analytical responses.

Providing comments which go beyond concern for the correctness of language, and respond to the validity of thought as well.

Pedagogy involving critical thinking brought into the process of teaching writing can not only make students improved writers, but also independent thinkers. That fits in with the broader educational objective of preparing students for intellectual and professional existence in the world economy.

5.2 Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited by sample size and cultural context. Results may vary in other regions or for students with varying levels of proficiency. Future studies could explore longitudinal impacts of critical thinking instruction or examine how computer software (e.g., AI writing support) affects students' reasoning operations.

6. Conclusion

Critical thinking occupies an essential position within English learners' acquisition of skills in academic essay writing. Through critical thinking, they can articulate arguments logically, think critically on evidence, and convey thoughtful viewpoints. Critical thinking in this research is put front and center through ESL writing pedagogy's emphasis and it supplies definite pedagogical practice to achieve so. As global communication increasingly emphasizes critical engagement and informed discussion, equipping English learners with these skills becomes not just desirable but imperative.

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