

Exploring EFL Students' Critical Thinking through Reflective Journal

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Abstract

Critical thinking, as one of the 21st century skills, is a necessary skill needed to prepare students for further studies and the workforce. This study aimed at exploring English students' critical thinking skills through reflective journal. The study focused on two research questions: (1) To what extent does reflective journal enhance the EFL students' critical thinking? (2) What aspect of EFL students' critical thinking skills does enhance significantly? A quantitative and qualitative design were utilized. Applying purposive sampling technique, 30 EFL students who participated in micro teaching course in Universitas Negeri Makassar were taken as sample of the research. The instrument of this research was students' reflective journals. The data collected were analyzed through descriptive statistical as well as qualitative analysis. The results of the research showed that the use of reflective journal in Micro Teaching course improves EFL students' critical thinking skills in moderate way. The significant increase in students' critical thinking takes place in evaluating aspect reaching approximately 70% increase. This indicates that reflective journal helps facilitate the EFL students improve their ability to develop their analysis in determining the strengths and weaknesses of their teaching practices in a factful and logical way. The study also indicated that some students still find it difficult to make final statement in conclusion as the best alternative solution to improve their practice in the future. Finally, the study implies that EFL teachers need to do their best to integrate critical thinking in their teaching either explicitly or implicitly.

Keywords: *Critical Thinking, Reflective Journal, Evaluating Argumentation.*

INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking is a part of the 4 Cs concepts (critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication) which is the central focus of education in the 21st century. The first concept of critical thinking was proposed by John Dewey in which he defined it as an active and persistence process of thinking to get an accurate conclusion and self-interpretation (Dewey, 2005). Critical thinking is a skill to apply methods, which requires great effort to examine every belief or knowledge of assumptions (allegations) supporting evidence and the further conclusions that result from it (Glaser, 1972). It emphasizes sense making and reflective processes that lead to decision (Ennis, 2002). Facione stated that critical thinking is thinking that has a goal to prove something, interpret meaning, and solve problem (Facione, 2010).

Critical thinking should focus on the evaluative component whose outcomes are ultimately judgments. This is in line with Mathew Lipman's definition which emphasizes the evaluative nature of critical thinking in supposing that the outcomes of critical thinking are ultimately judgements; critical thinking is thus 'skillful, responsible thinking that facilitates good judgement

because it (1) relies upon criteria, (2) is self-correcting, and (3) is sensitive to context' (Heard et al., 2020). Similarly, according to Facione (2010), the core of critical thinking skills include (1) interpretation to understand the meaning of something, (2) analysis to understand more deeply a matter can be through data, information etc., (3) inference to draw conclusions from data collection and information, (4) evaluation to assess the credibility of the conclusions generated, (5) an explanation to state the truth, reasons, and evidence, and (6) self-regulation/reflecting as the final stage, namely validation. In addition, critical thinking skills determine one's success in building understanding and constructive criticism of a concept. The ability to think critically will grow the level of knowledge and understanding of a concept continuously.

Previous researches suggested that undergraduate English majors lacked excellent critical thinking skills. Additionally, textual analysis of typical essays revealed that learners with strong critical thinking skills perform much better than that with weak critical thinking skills in terms of relevance, clarity, logicality, profundity, and adaptability (Pei, Zheng, Zhang, & Liu, 2017). Furthermore, although the undergraduate students' ability to use more credible evidence, address alternative arguments, support conclusions, and maintain the logical flow of ideas in their essays did not reach a mastery level in the posttest, the average level they achieved is reassuring due to the short time they had to undergo at the experiment period. An integration of CT for longer periods may bring forth encouraging outcomes (Nejmaoui, 2018).

Furthermore, reflection is clearly related to critical thinking. It is a step in the critical thinking process that refers to the processes of assessing and making decisions. Reflection in education refers to thinking through knowledge and learning rather than looking back (Boud, 1985). Reflection is as a retrospective analysis or recall (the ability of self-assessment) (Schön, 1990). It can connect the gap between theoretical ideals and realities of the practice context. Teachers can reflect thoughts or ideas to combine previous experiences and how from those experiences affect their teaching practice in the classroom. Reflection as a solving process problem (awareness of how someone learns) required steps to analyze and explain the problem before taking action, then make self-critical reflection to develop self-improvement continuously. In addition, critical reflection can be considered as an analytical process, reconsider and questioning experience in the broad context of a problem.

Teaching notebooks contained greater reflection on personal and contextual components of teaching, indicating that pre-service teachers were more concerned with situational areas of education that impacted their instructional practice than critical aspects of teaching (Astika, 2014). Reflective writing improves students' conceptual knowledge of the course, encourages a growth mentality, and illuminates their inner ideas. This study carried out by Hussein (2018) discovered that reflective journal writing had a substantial impact on EFL learners' grasp of topics and on the development of a growth mindset. When writing reflectively, six criteria are of necessary to evaluate: (a) arguments, which are claims that are supported by a reason, (b) reasons, which are statements that claims and generally answer why the claim should be believed, (c) evidences, which are statements or assertions serving to strengthen the arguments, (d) recognizing and refuting opposition, which is opposing viewpoints that run counter or offer alternative interpretations to those expressed in the claim, (e) final thoughts, which are a statement or series of statements in which a writer sets out what she wants the reader to believe) and (f) misconceptions, which are errors in reasoning. If the aspects of reflective writing are linked to essential thinking skills, the image looks somewhat like this.

More recently, Heard et al (2020) put forward five components or aspects of critical thinking skills suggested to use when examining a reflective journal. These five components include analyzing, synthesizing, explaining, evaluating, and inferencing. Detail explanation about these five components is described in the following table.

Table 1. Critical Thinking Aspects on Reflective Journal (Heard et al., 2020)

Aspects	Description	Subskills
Analyzing	Interpreting information to determine meaning and to present relevant evidence	a. Examine ideas b. Identify arguments c. Identify reasons and claims
Synthesizing	Connecting or integrating information to support an argument or reach conclusion	a. Elaborate on Ideas b. Organize ideas and writing c. Shape and structure the arguments
Explaining	Creating an argument through logical process	a. State results b. Justify procedures c. Present arguments
Evaluating	Judging the value, credibility, or strengths of something to support an argument or conclusion	b. Query evidence c. Conjecture alternatives d. Draw logically valid or justified conclusions
Inference	Identify and secure elements needed to draw reasonable conclusions	a. Assess credibility of claims b. Assess quality of arguments using inductive and deductive reasoning

These aspects refer to the act of reflecting on and organizing information such as data, evidence, statements, questions, concepts, opinions, and other forms of representation, in order to create sense and meaning from it (Sternberg, 1986; Watson & Glaser, 1964). the ability to analyze and sort information to find patterns and construct conceptual relationships within it is required (Fisher & Scriven, 1997).

In conclusion, micro teaching courses should incorporate journal writing as a tool that serves as a reflection frame for students' professional language learning and growth as practitioners in the field of language teaching. Writing journal as a reflective practice also helps pre-service teachers to develop their critical thinking, not only to the teaching aspects but also to their lesson planning(Dumlao & Pinatacan, 2019). In this case, this study aims to explore EFL Students' critical thinking through reflective journals they write through micro teaching course. The focus of this research includes (1) to what extent does reflective journal enhance the EFL students' critical thinking? and (2) what aspect of EFL students' critical thinking skills does enhance significantly?

METHOD

Participant

This research is mixed method with a descriptive quantitative and qualitative approach. It was conducted on the sixth semester EFL students who participated in micro teaching course in English Education Study Program, Universitas Negeri Makassar. The micro teaching course consists of 3 classes from which 30 EFL students were taken as sample of the research. The researchers act as observers who monitor activities during the teaching practicum process. During the micro teaching course that took place in 16 meetings, the lecturer gave instruction that one of the goals in micro teaching process is to carry out a self- reflection on EFL students' teaching. The activities included making lesson plan, doing teaching practicum, reflecting on their own teaching practicum which results in reflective journal writing, as well as observing other EFL students' teaching practicum to get insight of better performance. The subjects in this study were selected by purposive sampling based on their participation in micro teaching course and submission of students' written reflective journal.

Instruments

The instruments used are the 4th, 9th and 14th weeks of reflective journals. The 4th week of reflective journal was chosen because it is the first reflective process after teaching practicum was done. At this point, writing reflective journal is new for students, while the reason for choosing the 9th week of reflective journal is EFL students already get more perspective after observations on several teaching practicum and reflecting process. In addition, the 14th week of reflective journal was chosen to see the development of student's critical thinking in the last session of teaching practicum. Moreover, observation and discussion were also carried out to add more data specially to analyze elements of critical thinking skills of EFL students that were not visible on their reflective journal.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data used critical thinking skills rubric. It was analyzed through statistical descriptive which consisted of 5-point Likert scale ranging from 5 to 1 (5 = excellent, 4 = good, 3 = adequate, 2 = limited, and 1 = poor) while descriptive qualitative described and analyzed activities based on observation checklists. Then, all data was presented to describe the enhancement of critical thinking skill of the EFL students.

FINDINGS

The result showed various critical thinking skills with indicators included analyzing, synthesizing, explaining, evaluating, and inferencing on reflective journals analysis that were written by 30 EFL students in Universitas Negeri Makassar. The data were presented in table below:

Table 2. Students' total scores for each component of critical thinking in reflective journal

No	Categories	Analysing		Synthesizing		Explaining		Evaluating		Inferencing	
1.	Excellent	7	23,3 %	4	13,3 %	3	10%	-	-	-	-
2.	Good	17	56,7 %	5	16,8 %	18	60 %	7	23,3 %	6	20 %
3.	Adequate	-	-	7	23,3 %	4	13,3 %	21	70 %	6	20 %
4.	Limited	6	20 %	10	33,3 %	3	10 %	-	-	12	40 %
5.	Poor	-	-	4	13,3 %	2	6,7 %	2	6,7 %	6	20 %
		30	100 %	30	100 %	30	100 %	30	100 %	30	100 %

From the table above, a number of EFL students were categorized excellent in three out the five components of critical thinking – 7 in Analyzing, 4 in Synthesizing, and 3 in Explaining component. However, none of the students showed their performance in Evaluating and Inferencing components. In good category, the EFL students showed their ability in all of the five components of critical thinking skills – 17 in Analyzing, 5 in Synthesizing, 18 in Explaining, 7 in Evaluating, and 6 in Inferencing.

In the Analyzing component, most students (56,7%) showed their good ability in presenting their ideas through reflective journal. These students are able to examine their ideas and experiences, identify their judgements, claims and reasons from their teaching practicum. In this component, though 6 students showed their ability in Limited category, none of the students were in adequate and poor category. Quite different from the Analyzing component, the students showed various skill in Synthesizing – 14 students were classified in low category (10 in Limited and 4 in Poor), 9 in high category (4 in Excellent and 5 in Good) whereas the other 7 were in Adequate category. They apparently had different skills in elaborating ideas, organizing their ideas, and also forming ideas into arguments. This is to say, the highest percentage is 33,3 % in limited categories because it was found that only several students were able to write references or experts' opinion on their writing. Most students could not provide others' point of views on their own opinion very well.

In Explaining component, most students (60%) were classified into good category. It means students could describe the contents of their teaching practicum, justify the procedure of their teaching, and then present their arguments in reflective journal. They mostly explained about the implementation of the lesson plan, learning method, learning media or teaching process they used in their teaching practicum.

In Evaluating component, none of the students achieved excellent category; the highest performance was at good category which was achieved by 7 students or about 23,3% of the sample. In this component, most of the students (70%) were in adequate category whereas 6,7% was in poor category. This means that they were able to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their teaching performance that need to be improved for the next teaching process. In other words, the students mostly had adequate ability in judging the value and strengths of evidences to support the argument or conclusion. The similar trend happened in Inferencing component of critical thinking with the highest percentage (40%) fell into limited category. This indicates that the students find it difficult to assess the credibility of claims and the quality of arguments to draw reasonable and logical conclusion.

In general, the EFL students through reflective journals used deductive reasoning in expressing their ideas and experiences, claims and judgment about the teaching practicum they

have done. Since many students find it to assess the credibility of claims as well as the quality of arguments, they were unable to draw reasonable and logical conclusion.

The observation carried out during the EFL students performed micro teaching practicum revealed some data. First, the EFL students mostly recall what happened during their teaching practicum. Second, they were accustomed to starting their oral reflection with commenting on the weaknesses they experienced in their teaching practicum. Third, they preferred not to explain the strengths they showed during their teaching practicum, except they were asked to. Fourth, they tended to speak out their ideas in a simple way. Fifth, they found it difficult to elaborate evidences in supporting their arguments and claims. Last but not the least, they generally feel reluctant to decide the most significant alternative solution they choose in order to improve their teaching practices in the future.

DISCUSSION

Analyzing Skill

Analyzing skill in critical thinking is the ability to solve a problem based on the information gathered by an individual. This skill can assist individuals in formulating solutions to problems. Through reflective journals, EFL students collect information from teaching practicum experiences and the learning process while observing other students. For example, as described in a reflective journal by one of the EFL students, namely RR, where he analyzed the performance made during teaching practicum.

I have practiced the teaching I did yesterday in class, where I interacted like a teacher and student interaction. In order to seem like a teacher, there must be support in teaching such as RPP and LKPD and PPT, but my preparation was not mature enough and there was a misunderstanding, where in working on the RPP it turned out that the RPP I made was not in accordance with the RPP in general what was requested, namely RPP and also LKPD and PPT. Honestly, I was confused about this and from my point of view my work was done right, but there is still a lot to improve.

In addition, AR performs an analysis of the learning activities he carries out as described in the following reflective journal

First, I did not fully follow the lesson plan that I had made. In the lesson plan, I wrote that I must involve students in the learning process by asking them to find as much information as possible about the material that I will present which will then be discussed together in class, but I did not apply it because I was nervous so I forgot to apply it. and jump straight to the explanation of the material.

RR and AR collected the information obtained which later would be analyzed objectively, so that in their reflective journals, the arguments presented are systematic and structured. In principle, the stages of the critical thinking process start from understanding the problem. Both reflective journals from the EFL students showed that there was a problem in identification process. After getting some important information, RR could examine ideas, and process it. He could identify the real problem before finally looking for a solution to solve the problem.

Synthesizing Skill

Synthesis skills are in the form of complete and new writing about summaries from various reference sources regarding understanding or opinions. synthesis in reflective journals becomes new ideas or ideas given by EFL students to solve the problems found. This idea can broadly provide views and discussions or other forms of argumentativeness by the author within certain limits. Here AAS tried to apply synthesis skills in its reflective journal.

According to H. Daryanto (2005: 58) learning objectives are goals that describe the knowledge, abilities, skills, and attitudes that students must possess as a result of learning outcomes expressed in the form of observable and measurable behavior. That is why putting the learning goals in the RPP needs to be done for the clear steps to reach them. Then I also conveyed detailed learning instructions where I wrote on the blackboard what things would be learned during the learning process and explained them in line with the first teacher's function as a teacher, or instructional.

NG also tried to elaborate on the opinion of one expert regarding the descriptive text learning material being taught, so that he is able to provide his own ideas which he will practice in his teaching practicum.

In a broad sense, description, as explained by Kane (2000: 352), is defined like in the following sentence: Description is about sensory experience—how something looks, sounds, tastes. Mostly it is about visual experience, but description also deals with other kinds of perception. Thus, if we conclude it from Kane's explanation above, the descriptive text is meaningful text that describes the experience related to the senses, such as what shape, sound, taste is. Most descriptive text is about visual experience, but in fact the experience other than the sense of sight, we can also use it to make descriptive text.

In the reflective journal, AAS and NG only cited one opinion from an expert regarding learning objectives. Unfortunately, the AAS did not provide more expert opinions or references, so the perspective on the preparation and presentation of learning objectives in teaching was still lacking. In conclusion, the new idea of EFL students regarding learning objectives was limited.

Explaining Skill

The ability to explain is the ability to present information or arguments, not to prove something. Explaining is included in critical thinking skills because the results of the thinking process are presented in logical arguments. It was identified in F's reflective journal as an EFL students.

The last activity is summary section and reflection at the end of the class. In this occasion, I gave instruction for all of the students to share their opinions related to the topic explained during the learning process. In order to make sure about their understanding related to the materials, I pointed them out one by one.

In addition, NY tries to provide an explanation regarding how to deliver material in class, which can be found in the following reflective journals.

From the teaching and learning process that I have done, I can judge myself that I have been able to teach well, I have been able to interact with my students well, such as asking about the material I have explained, whether they have understood it or not. what I described. I also quite understand the material that I convey. My voice is also quite good, not too big or not too small, so that students are comfortable listening to it.

He explained about the activities during the practicum teaching clearly while NY explanation about her voice was a bit ambiguous that might lead confusion. This ability to explain is also very important because it shows the ability of EFL students to communicate their thoughts which is part of critical thinking. Students use simple language so that the arguments are easy to understand. However, even though, using certain terms, EFL students are required to be able to explain without ambiguity in words or phrases.

Evaluating Skill

Evaluation includes the assessment of results and processes. Through evaluation, EFL students determined the success achieved as an output from teaching practicum. To carry out the assessment stage in the evaluation requires certain criteria to be used as an assessment standard. The criteria included lesson plans, basic teacher teaching skills (opening and closing, asking questions, explaining, giving encouragement, guiding discussions, teaching, and managing class skills). These criteria refer to the topic of the problem, or are developed to improve understanding of a problem. As it is shown in MA's reflective journal below.

Apart from that the comments for me are good. From the feedback, I gave. Student activity during learning, mastery of the material and so on. After that I got some suggestions from the supervisory lecturer where she said as teachers, we must be able to optimize the time used and also as teachers we have to be on time in everything, especially in the provision of learning. From all of these inputs I can accept so that I can use it as a lesson to be able to create good learning in the future. Then, the observer, gives the result of her observation for my teaching simulation. She mentioned some of the points according to the assessment sheet, such as; how I give an apperception (by greeting the students, mentioning the topic and learning objectives, asking the students to pray, and checking their attendance); deliver the material; giving instructions to the students, etc. which she asses as "good". The weakness of my teaching simulation was my time management in the teaching process and the reflection session, due to the limited time so I had not enough time to let the students answer the worksheet in the PowerPoint, so I think it was such a good reminder and suggestion for me that I need to pay attention to my time management in the teaching process.

ZFM also conducted a reflective evaluation regarding performance during the teaching practicum as listed below.

After doing the Micro Teaching, I was given an opportunity to do some reflection on my performance. Overall, I did a good job. The tone I was using was good and very clear eventhough I was a bit in rush since the time is limited but there was no student who asked to repeat the explanation. I was able to use the time given effectively. In 10 minutes, I did what exactly written on my lesson plan, starting from initial activity, core activity, until closing activity. I also have good interaction between students, none of the students I haven't asked during the class. The students were also very active, they always responded to my questions. In addition, the PowerPoint is colorful and quite interesting to look at, this is also important since it could attract students' attention to always pay attention to the PowerPoint.

Both MA and ZFM possessed evaluating skills in the mediate category. They are able to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses in their performance based on predetermined criteria. MA's critical thinking skills were shown in evaluating the strengths that were taken from other students' feedback and his notes regarding the ability to master the material in class, MA evaluated the shortcomings in terms of the time allocation that has been set in the lesson plan, as well as the lack of ability to open and close the lesson. Meanwhile ZFN evaluated its already good performance which is based on the lesson plan of the criteria, but he realized that her weakness is also in the time allocation.

Inferencing Skill

Inferencing skill become higher thinking activities carried out consciously and systematically that are interconnected and aim to reach conclusions. All arguments claim that was written such as evidence or reasons used to provide support for conclusions. SFT's reflective journal can be an example of inferencing skill done by EFL students.

The thing needs to be revised in the lesson plan is about the amount of time given every section which is too long based on the rule made by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. Also, the point of activities which still inappropriate, in this case, there are things which improvised during the actual teaching practice as the teacher feels there are several necessary things to do which is not listed in the lesson plan such as the little games played (Argument).

From what I have learned, I really think this would be really helpful as I realize the importance of the lesson plan as the guide for the teacher ideas in delivering their material. They should also reflect the way their teaching in order to get better in the future (Conclusion).

The same thing can also be seen from the reflective journal written by ABW which provides evidence in the form of a short argument then immediately gives a conclusion.

When teaching, make it a habit to write on the blackboard facing the front, the students do not turn their backs so that students do not see more clearly what the teacher has written. on the blackboard (Argument)

Maybe it's some that I need to improve in the next learning method. I also need to provide conclusions at the end of the lesson so that my students understand more about the material that has been explained previously. I feel the need to improve my way of teaching in the future (Conclusion).

Deductive reasoning tried to prove conclusions with rigorous, inescapable logic that arguments progress from general ideas to specific conclusion. Through the reflective sections presented, SFT and ABW drew logical conclusions based on inference rules, and also prove and conclusion construct valid argument. She put forward the argument for the discrepancy between the time allocation of teaching practicum and the time allocation based on the ministry of education, but the conclusion section did not show much reasoning. This showed the ability to carry out ca based on certain rules generally classified as critical thinking low level.

CONCLUSIONS

The reflective journals written by the EFL students contained ideas from observation and practical experiences, logically and structured arguments, presentation of evidence, arrangement of ideas and writing, as well as reasoning activities. These reflective journals moderately enhanced the EFL students' critical thinking in terms of analyzing, synthesizing, explaining, evaluating, and inferencing components. By examining the EFL students' reflective journals on their teaching practicum, the patterns and connection with the critical thinking skills of EFL students at Universitas Negeri Makassar could be identified. The significant increase in students' critical thinking took place in evaluating aspect reaching approximately 70%, while the insignificant aspect is in poor inferencing aspect with 40%.

Despite the fact that EFL students had not demonstrated excellent critical thinking skills on reflective journals writing, they continuously improved, adapted and revised the plans according to the experiences they had throughout their teaching practicum to make better performance. Reflective writing gave the feeling of having more confidence in teaching performances, provided an opportunity to develop themselves to be better by learning their strengths and weaknesses, as well as provide them the freedom to be flexible in teaching. Moreover, writing reflective journals continuously may help the EFL students to critical and effective teachers in the future.

The findings of the research indicated that writing reflective journals on teaching practices is urgent in facilitating the students to be better, critical and effective learners. Similarly, the research also revealed that writing reflective journals enhance the EFL students' critical thinking skills, particularly in evaluating aspect. This research findings imply that it is of necessary to integrate critical thinking skills components in English education. As Lai (2011) suggests that explicit instruction in critical thinking needs to be included in the curriculum, whether as a stand-alone course, infused into subject-matter content, or both.

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