

The perception of EFL student teachers on the teaching and use of critical thinking

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Abstract

Critical thinking (CT) is crucial aspect in English language education, yet little attention has been given to language teacher's perception an experience regarding CT during the pre-service of their teaching career. The data of the present study were gained from the focus group discussion and interview which covered the participants' understanding of CT and its use in the teaching and learning process. The study indicates that the participants had limited understanding of CT, they need more support to be able to apply CT properly in their teaching process, and they also faced contextual challenges when integrating CT into their teaching. The study suggests that critical mindset should be cultivated among the student-teachers, so that they can develop proper CT-oriented pedagogies.

Keywords: *critical thinking; language education; English*

Introduction

As one of the aspects of education, Critical thinking has some essential features which every language teacher should know. Critical thinking is the intellectual process of actively conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action. In its exemplary form, it is based on universal intellectual values that transcend subject matter divisions: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth, and fairness (Scriven & Paul, 1987). According to Paul and Elder (2019), CT has a twofold nature related to Cognitive skills, such as analysing, interpreting, and evaluating, and disposition, e.g. having open-mindedness, having inquisitiveness, and having autonomy. Jones (2015) stated that the CT should be urtured because it is a complicated skill that teachers and students need to understand on how it should be learnt. Providing students with interactive

activities such as collaborative reading, discussions, and reflections will foster the CT process and students can internalize it (Wilson, 2016).

On the other hand, the cultural background of the students may influence the way CT should be learnt. In Indonesian culture, especially Javanese culture, the students are mostly reluctant to get involved in a discussion in which the attributes of CT are present. A study conducted by Choy and Cheah (2009) indicates that some language teachers' understanding of CT is relatively superficial which may contribute to less success in the teaching of CT. Therefore, there is a need to incorporate CT into pre-service or student-teacher education to help them with CT-pedagogical competence.

Wilson (2016) states that CT is viewed as an important component of education, including in language education. However, implementing CT in EFL context is still troublesome and challenging for language teachers, especially in Indonesia. As stated by Lee (2016) that the language teachers still have some problems in understanding the concept of CT since they have broad and ambiguous understanding and they also have lack professional competence to cover the needs of the students in language learning and the development of CT when it comes to the individual level. Upon the implementation of CT, language teachers may also face some obstacles related to sociocultural and institutional environment. For instance, when EFL teachers try to implement CT pedagogies in language classrooms, the English proficiency of the students may affect the students' success in working on the demanding tasks. Thus, EFL teachers might alter both CT and language instruction in their classrooms. Yuan (2017) states that in other educational context, some stakeholder, (e.g. parents and school leaders), might give less space for the EFL teachers to implement the CT since the stakeholders urge the school to focus on improving students' examination scores.

The existing literature has discussed on various approaches and tasks in developing students' CT in language classrooms, but there is little research on student teachers' views and experiences or practice regarding CT (Petek & Bedir, 2018). It is believed that the sociocultural and individual experiences affect the implementation of the CT development (Lee, 2016; Li & Wegerif, 2014) (Lee, 2016). Addressing the problem above, the current study investigates a group of student teachers' perception and experiences regarding the CT use in an undergraduate English education Program in Indonesia. This study covered the teaching experiences of the participants, current and past ones, in the local school contexts. This study is expected to shed a light on developing student teachers' competence along with the CT abilities and having the ability to use CT-oriented pedagogies in helping their future students to learn language and develop their language competence.

Methods

This exploratory study involved four-year undergraduate students of English Language Education Programme in a public university in Indonesia, Universitas Brawijaya. The program is designed to prepare the students to be professional language teachers, English teacher, who own pedagogical and language competence as the bases of their future teaching career. Within their four-year study, they were required to take teaching-practice courses prior to their two-month internship/teaching practice, called P4, in a school. The researchers distributed 50 consent forms to the student teacher who have had their internship, but 10 students were willing to take part in the research. Although all participants were still pursuing their undergraduate degree, they have been equipped with pedagogical knowledge as the basic of their teaching. All the participants had some limited teaching experiences although they have already their teaching practicum in local schools.

Since the data collection was done through interviews in a group discussion, the participants were divided into two groups; five student teachers for each. The focus group interviews were meant to collect reflection; their understanding about CT; and their previous experience in developing their CT-oriented pedagogies. The two-hour interview session with the participants, the questions focused on what they perceive about CT; how they developed their CT before they joined college; whether they implemented their knowledge about CT in their classrooms, and the obstacles they met when implementing CT.

After the analysis of the group interviews, three student teachers were invited to the follow-up individual-interview session which was done online since they shared interesting stories. The questions were about their perception and experiences of CT and its use. One of the examples from the focus interviews, one of the participants stated that the English Language Education Program (ELEP) provided the Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) in one of the courses, namely Material Development course in which the CT is learnt. The follow-up interview session covered the question like the challenges they face during the teaching practicum or intership in the local schools.

This study employed the bottom-up analytical approach [Miles and Huberman \(1994\)](#) to analyse the data which are based on the formulated research question. The interview result which was transcribed from the three participants were analysed to identify codes which reflected the perception of CT and their ways in developing CT-oriented practices as future language teachers.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

This section presents the research results about the student teachers' experiences related to its use/teaching. The findings of the study indicate that most of the participants, 8 out of 10, have limited understanding about CT; as the excerpt below explains:

If we are critical, we always search for new perspective and question about anything.

The excerpt explains that the student two (S2) does not have full understanding about CT because she stopped halfway. Although her understanding about CT is supported by Paul and Elder (2018) which states that "searching for new view points" is one of the attributes of CT, but S2 failed to explain the other attributes for instance, formulating hypothesis, testing hypothesis, collecting relevant informations etc. different from S2, S7 and S10 explained more detail about CT which says:

We call ourself critical when we always see the opposite point of view, solve problems which come with evidence. CT also helps us to have better understanding about thing/situation/condition and define our acts.

The excerpt indicates that S2 and S10 have better understanding about CT because they explain how it can help them to see view points from different sides which is one of the attributes of CT. it also tells that both of them relate the idea of being critical means being able to cope with complex social reality "better understanding about things, situation, condition, and defining our acts"

The participants were asked whether the proficiency courses in ELEP foster the understanding and help them to develop their CT. S9 stated that ELEP facilitated the development of CT, for instance, the Material Development course requires the students to create assesments tools for their students which should accomdate the Higher Order Thinking Skills. In this course, the students learnt how to use the blooms taxonomy, the revised version, from which the students learnt how to create an evaluation which involves CT. While creating the evaluation, S9 felt that he is being more critical and able to help their students when using CT-oriented evaluation tools developed. Such experiences made the student teachers engaged in higher-order thinking automatically, so it broadens their horizons and grow sense of CT. Here is the excerpt of S9:

When my lecturer asked me to use the revised version of blooms taxonomy, I know what to do to help my students think critically and I ,myself, am aware of thinking critically while I was developing the tools. It fosters the critical thinking of mine and my students as well.

In general, the critical thinking ability of the participants are acquired from the courses, Material Development, Essay Writing, which offer the students with higher-order thinking tasks. However, they said that the training of CT is still offered in an individual course; which is not embeded in systematic organization in the ELEP curriculum; which explains there should be more training of CT to foster better understanding and use of CT for their future teaching career.

Another prominent finding of this research is the participants received less instruction on how to develop CT-oriented pedagogies. Although some courses contribute to the growth of the participants CT, the programmes should provide more systematic CT-oriented activities which lead the students to be able to integrate the CT in their language class. Here is the excerpt taken from interview of S5, S7, S8:

I still have ambiguous understanding about CT, since I cannot define what exactly CT is...as a future teacher; I have no idea how to help my students develop their CT skill.

I will be a teacher but I myself still have difficulties about developing my own CT, moreover helping my students with CT. I need more support from the program to develop my CT-oriented pedagogies.

The excerpt explains that the participants have low self-confidence in teaching CT since they themselves do not know how to integrate the CT into language teaching. As also shared by S1 and S3, there is no particular course which is created to discuss CT alone. The programme curriculum of ELEP does not design a course which focuses on what and how to develop the CT instruction. This indicates that the student teachers do not have enough support to develop their CT-oriented pedagogies, although some courses have already discussed on CT development. The limited support was also found in this excerpt

Some lecturers implicitly taught us how to be critical in their teaching, but some of us might not realize that the lecturers guide us to be more critical through modelling. The student teacher should get more benefits from the modelling if the lecturers explicitly tell us that CT-oriented pedagogies involved.

Without explicit modelling and activating the students' schemata on the CT-oriented pedagogies, student teachers have hard times to notice and internalize the CT in the language classrooms. It further explains that they have low self-confidence as CT-oriented language teachers. It might be because they are still student teachers of an undergraduate program who are not critical enough, or less experienced.

The last distinguished finding of the current research is dealing with the challenges faced by the student teachers during their teaching practice at the local schools, such as shyness (typical characteristics attached to Javanese people), and the exam-oriented culture in some schools.

I was trying very hard to implement CT-oriented pedagogies but it seems that it does not work very well on my students because most of them are Javanese who are most reluctant to get involved in a discussion, not because they do not understand the tasks at hand but they are very shy students. It hinders the practice of CT activities in my class

The excerpt explains further about the failure of using CT-oriented pedagogies in the language classrooms. S3, S5, S6, S7, S8, S10 experienced the same situation when the CT was implemented in the classroom in which very few students were willing to involve and speak up when given the open-ended questions based on their levels. Practicing CT-oriented pedagogies in those schools seemed useless since the culture hinders their participation in such classroom atmosphere.

Another culture which really hinders the CT use in local schools is the exam-oriented activities. The school leaders in some schools design the teaching activities to prepare the students for exam, so they can score high.

In the teaching practice, I was assigned by my advisor (senior teacher) to help students with the exam preparation almost three fourth of my teaching. I did not have freedom to integrate the CT activities in my classrooms which is so sad. I designed mini syllabus which covers the CT development for my students but it was useless because I hardly have to implement it.

There were four student teachers who have similar problems in their teaching practices. It explains that they had no space to implement the activities in which CT is involved. Unfortunately, the senior teacher did not allow them to give students another activity but exam preparation. The exam preparation was

mostly dealt with the language use which is impossible to incorporate CT in the classrooms.

Discussion

Although the data of this study were gained from interview of limited number of participants, it explains the student teachers' perception and experience related to CT and its use in teaching practicum or Micro Teaching and local school contexts. The finding postulates that the participants that they did not get enough teaching about CT which results in their limited understanding and have less competent to integrate the CT in their language classrooms. The cultural issues bound in schools and students make CT has even less space to be implemented.

The prominent finding of this research tells that student benefited from the courses within the ELEP programme which integrated CT as activities and tasks. It suggests that the language teachers, as individual agent, should provide meaningful materials, topics, and tasks to grow the CT and CT-oriented pedagogy. In relation to Indonesian contexts, [Petek and Bedir \(2018\)](#) stated that language educators can help students teachers to involve in a critical reading and small-scale research projects on topics which require them to make inferences, do analysis, and create arguments. These activities foster the development of CT and deepen their CT-oriented pedagogy in relation to the values and norms in language classrooms.

In line with [Petek and Bedir \(2018\)](#) and [\(Golding, 2011\)](#) also stated that creating meaningful tasks about CT along with authentic materials will develop the ability of acquiring specific thinking process and CT-oriented pedagogy naturally. Making the elements to be more explicit make the student teachers internalize the teaching principles of CT and know the strategies in implementing the CT in their classrooms. CT teaching should not only focus on creating, developing, and managing space to think but also by questioning assumptions, seeking the best and laternative solution to any problems ([Li & Wegerif, 2014](#)). Therefore, modelling and explaining the techniques of City explicitly is essential, so the student teacher can incorporate the CT into their teaching skills.

Different from the research result of [Yuan and Stapleton \(2020\)](#) which explains that the school culture is in the form of exam-preparations, the current study found that the form challenges is mostly on the typical characteristics of Javanese culture which most students are shy and reluctant to get involve in critical pedagogical activities. Thus, it is suggested that the language educators provide and creat classroom atmospheres which make the students comfortables to engage in classrooms activities which foster CT.

Conclusion

The CT is a pivotal aspect in language education especially when it comes to complex social environment. This profession requires an individual who possesses good understanding of CT, has competent CT abilities, has good knowledge of CT-oriented pedagogy, and is able to integrate the CT in his/her classrooms. Research on the effective instruction of CT is crucial and educating student teachers to be more aware of the CT practice. How incorporating CT into a classroom should be well informed to language teachers.

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