

The Role of Critical Thinking in Enhancing EFL MA Students' Academic Writing Outcomes: A Survey Study

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ABSTRACT

Critical thinking skills are necessary tools for promoting postgraduates' academic writing. This study explores postgraduates' responses towards the role of critical thinking skills in academic writing courses. The study adopts Peter Honey Critical Thinking questionnaire which is delivered online to EFL MA students at the Department of English in the University of Tripoli in order to collect data. 20 students participate in the questionnaire which aims to find out whether EFL MA students are aware of the role of critical thinking skills in enhancing the writing of their written assignments and theses. The results reveal that EFL MA students are aware of the important role that critical thinking skills play in developing academic writing courses and in producing quality content texts.

المخلص

تعتبر مهارات التفكير الناقد من أهم الأدوات التي يحتاجها طلبة الدراسات العليا. تستكشف هذه الدراسة دور مهارات التفكير الناقد لدى طلاب الدراسات العليا في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة طرابلس وخاصة في تأثيرهم على أنشطة تدريس الكتابة الأكاديمية. وتعتمد الدراسة على استبيان **Peter Honey Critical Thinking** الذي تم توزيعه عبر الإنترنت لطلبة الدراسات العليا في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية وذلك بغية جمع البيانات لهذه الدراسة. وقد شارك

في الاستبيان 20 طالباً. سعى الاستبيان لمعرفة ما إذا كان متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية يتمتعون بمهارات التفكير الناقد التي يمكن أن تعزز إنتاج نصوص كتابة محسنة لواجباتهم وأطروحاتهم. تظهر النتائج أن الطلبة يدركون أن مهارات التفكير الناقد ذات أهمية كبيرة ولها دور إيجابي في الأنشطة التعليمية لدورات الكتابة.

Keywords: critical thinking, academic writing, EFL postgraduates, MA writing courses

Introduction

Critical thinking is a broadly acknowledged skill for personal and academic maturity, primarily owing to globalization and technology expansion (Yaiche, 2021). In educational contexts, critical thinking is a trend that has been widely investigated in various educational institutions (Rashtchi & Khoshnevisan, 2020, Klimova, 2013). Consequently, discussions and arguments on the implications of critical thinking in academic writing in higher education institutions are still going on. Nevertheless, critical thinking skills are overlooked in EFL writing programs, a defect that requires holistic reforms in syllabus content as well as teaching and learning methods, so as to cultivate students' ability in applying critical thinking skills on their learning styles (Widyastuti, 2018). On top of that, several current empirical studies reveal that a lot of colleges and universities worldwide neither encourage students to think critically nor do they develop

reasoning competence even though they claim that they strive to develop critical thinkers. However, this mainly pertains to teachers' lack of training in critical thinking skills and strategies (Taghinezhad et al., 2019). Evidently, this is common in cultures that undervalue critical thinking and which often results in students' failure in their academic life, specifically in argument-related skills of evaluation and analysis, owing to teachers' lack of training and applying critical thinking skills (Tahira & Haider, 2019).

Literature Review

Academic Writing in Post-Graduate Study Programs

Writing is arguably a fundamental element of language practice, both in instructive and specialized arenas in non-native English speaking countries (Leki, 2001). Definitely, it is one of the most universal skills that university graduates have to master in order to convey feelings, thoughts and arguments in a convincing way (Sabu & Vernandes, 2019). It assists students to learn, enjoy, and successfully engage in self-reflection (Graham, 2012). Generally, writing encapsulates a variety of genres that differ broadly in content and purpose, like reflective writing, creative writing, academic writing and so on.

Academic writing is undoubtedly an indispensable component of educational programs. It is a vastly complicated task, that is characterized by the manipulation of cognitive operations involved in language acquisition (Hattie, 2010). Students' mastery of academic writing allows them to exhibit arguments in essays logically and enables them to discuss and give constructive feedback on others' writing in an objective manner (Khazaal, 2019). More specifically, a high standard of academic writing proficiency is mandatory in post-graduate programs around the globe (Rabab'ah, 2001). Likewise, the acquisition of strong academic writing competence is an assessment prerequisite of EFL post-graduate students' English language proficiency at conducting research studies. However, it is noted that academic writing tasks have been entirely abandoned in many Arab universities, which pertains to the extensive reliance on traditional teaching methods that focus merely on general language courses (Al-Badi, 2015).

For example, Khazaal, (2019) argues that the majority of Iraqi post-graduate students are unable to write satisfactory academic texts with good organization and strong reasoning. This is due to the lack of engagement opportunities in academic writing activities that can

reinforce academic writing skills and the discrepancies in their linguistic and educational levels (ibid).

Interplay of Critical Thinking and Academic Writing

Critical thinking is a key constituent of effective academic writing (Şenel & Bağçeci, 2019). Academic writing and critical thinking are interrelated in various ways, since students have to reflect on what they think (Rahmat et al., 2020, Widyastuti, 2018). Taghinezhad et al. (2019) examine the close correlation between critical thinking and academic writing. Their study inspects the relationship of critical thinking, explicit instruction, academic writing performance, critical thinking ability and critical thinking dispositions. The participants of the study have been divided into an experimental group and a control group, with the experimental group obtaining instruction incorporated with critical thinking strategies. The results uncover that the critical thinking technique used has been productive and rewarding.

The experimental group demonstrates a higher score in the academic writing test compared with the control group. Some researchers argue that critical thinking works best with argumentative essay writing. This is because most students find difficulty in developing and supporting

arguments by conducting adequate research about their topics of interest. They also find difficulty in expressing their voices over topics of their interest and in attracting readers' attention and persuading them to read and comment on what is written (Innabi, 2003).

In a different study, Sabu & Vernandes (2019) have conducted an experimental study and collected data using an argumentative writing test. Their study results uncover that students' critical thinking skills in writing argumentative essays have improved from average to good. The employment of critical thinking in academic writing classes functions better in a constructivist learning environment than a traditional one, where students can communicate face-to-face and engage in free genuine discussions (Şenel & Bağçeci, 2019).

Certainly, writing classes which engage students in critical thinking are assumed to be more valuable than writing in traditional ways (Widyastuti, 2018). Not only this, but such classes require the establishment of mutual interactions between students and their teachers (Borich, 2004). Robyal (2012) states that devoid of critical thinking, academic writing is meaningless, boring, and hard to follow.

Profitable implementation of critical thinking in academic writing classes is measured through students' capability to

analyze as well as to evaluate ideas and thoughts (Duron et al., 2006), the development of meta-cognitive skills and instilled self-regulated learning habits exhibited in planning, monitoring and evaluation (Halpern, 2007). In addition, students' academic writing proficiency is tested via their practical exploitation of interconnected cognitive skills like problem solving, formulating inferences, decision-making, reasoning, analysis, questioning, interpretation, evaluation and assumptions (Watson & Glaser, 2002). While involving in the process of critical thinking, students build up new thoughts and solutions about writing topics, produce and adopt new means of thinking until they finally succeed in conveying thoughts via writing and become critical writers (Şenel & Bağçeci, 2019).

Ways to Improve EFL Post-Graduates' Critical Thinking and Academic Writing Achievement

Critical thinking is neither an innate inclination on part of students nor an effortless task on part of teachers, but is a challenging skill that has to be nurtured and cultivated through training students to develop into critical thinkers and through implementing suitable strategies in academic writing classes (Rashtchi & Khoshnevisan, 2020). More precisely, critical thinkers must be able to bring in central

questions and problems, endeavor to define and articulate them distinctly, collect and evaluate related information, make use of speculative ideas, think broad-mindedly, and interact efficiently with others (Sabu & Vernandes, 2019, Widyastuti, 2018). To this end, some educators put forward some suggestions to better assist students' development of critical thinking in academic writing programs in EFL settings. For instance, Şenel & Bağçeci (2019) contend that the introduction of journal writing in writing courses is a thriving learning technique that can lead to students' vast acquisition of critical thinking skills.

Klimova (2013) advocates writing professors' use of a set of skills such as cognitive challenge, collaborative learning and meta-cognitive debates, all of which can positively impact and promote students' academic writing outcomes. A study conducted by Purwanti et al. (2020) reveals that digital media proves to offer a novel learning practice and outlet for students in addition to successfully increasing students' critical thinking, particularly in logical data interpretation and analysis, reasoning and argumentation. The adoption of critical thinking as part of continuing education leads to students' academic and social success (Kökdemir, 2003). Critical thinking can systematically be implemented into teaching programs to accomplish long-

lived and deep learning goals (Rahmat et al., 2020, Klimova, 2013). Therefore, it is quite possible to integrate critical thinking in writing classes as a main practice by implementing numerous activities that combine writing and critical thinking skills, since both skills promote and impact each other (Rashtchi & Khoshnevisan, 2020). Critical thinking incorporates insights into opinions and analyzes attitudes critically, which obliges students to participate in many critical writing tasks and get feedback to direct enhancement (Hogsette, 2019). Moreover, it is advisable for teachers to use well-prepared lesson plans from well-defined syllabuses and start classes with easy critical thinking tasks and progress gradually towards more difficult ones (Rashtchi & Khoshnevisan, 2020).

In this context, there is a clear reference to the great value of EFL university students' capitalization on their potential competences of critical thinking and self-voicing in the production of written texts that reflect their original thoughts and voices in academic writing classrooms. It initially reinforces writing professors' accountability and effort to training students in writing tasks which can ultimately accomplish that aim and boost EFL students' critical writing achievement (Widodo, 2012). Responsible writing professors continuously focus their instruction on

building students' long-life learning competences. Professors can encourage their students to engage in critical thinking and academic writing programs that can best assist them to solve problems and contribute to a more fruitful academic life (Williams-Shakespeare, 2018).

Methodology

This research adopts the quantitative approach in investigating writing activities of MA students at the University of Tripoli. This approach increases educators' understanding on how students process information. It also highlights the fact that certain writing practices may lead to some specific outcomes. The study uses an electronic survey which is designed to explore MA students' responses towards critical thinking skills. It is conducted at the Department of English, Faculty of Languages, University of Tripoli during the academic year of 2021-2022. The study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1) To what extent critical thinking can be employed in the MA students' activities?

RQ2) To what extent MA students are aware of the critical thinking skills?

RQ3) What positive role critical thinking skills can play in the teaching activities of MA students?

Research participants

This study includes 20 EFL MA students enrolled in the postgraduate program as a full-time student in the academic year of 2021-2022 at the Department of English in the Faculty of Languages, University of Tripoli. The sample consists of 14 females and 6 males. Their age ranges from 22 to 34 years old. They have similar levels of proficiency in English.

Instrument

The researchers adopt the Peter Honey Critical Thinking questionnaire as the instrument of the study. The questionnaire is created by Honey (2005) in order to assess the skills of analysis, evaluation, inference, and reasoning. It is divided into two sections. The first section includes personal and demographic questions about the gender and age of the participants. The second section includes the questions of the questionnaire which contain 30 statements on a 5-point Likert scale. In each statement, there are five choices to indicate how often the participants use or agree with a particular statement. The degrees of frequency are: Never (1) Occasionally (2), Sometimes (3), Often (4), and Always (5).

Procedure

Peter Honey's critical thinking questionnaire have distributed online through WhatsApp and Facebook. A short explanation about the nature of the questionnaire is written at the beginning of the questionnaire to the participants.

Analysis

The collected data is quantitatively calculated and analyzed from Peter Honey's Critical Thinking Test by using SPSS software (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) version 24. Different Tables of descriptive statistics involved the means and standard deviations of the data for all statements are calculated in order to discover and to find answers to the research questions.

Results

The first research question of this current study is **RQ1) - To what extent critical thinking can be employed in the MA students' activities?** In statements 1 – 10, the MA students are asked about how they use critical thinking within their activities. Table (1) presents the results of each statement. It reveals that ***statement 5 -I distinguish between facts and opinions***—is the most reported statement with a mean of 4.6 (which is the highest mean among all statements) and a very low standard deviation of

0.587142949 (see the results of other statements which are nearly similar means between 4.3 (high) to 3.0 (middle)).

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of statements: 1-10:

No	Statements	No. of MA students	Σ	Means	Standard deviation
1.	I make notes on the important elements of people's arguments or propositions (e.g. the topic, issues, thesis and main points).	20	72	3.6	1.87655807
2.	I test the assumptions underpinning an argument or proposition.	20	63	3.1	1.386969434
	I state my reasons for accepting or rejecting arguments and propositions.	20	87	4.3	0.74515982
4.	I put material I have read or seen into my own words to help me understand it.	20	85	4.2	0.716350399
5.	I distinguish between facts and opinions.	20	93	4.6	0.587142949
6.	I double-check facts for accuracy.	20	79	3.9	1.050062655
7.	I check other people's understanding of issues.	10	64	3.2	1.056309365
8.	I search for parallels and similarities between different issues.	20	66	3.3	1.174285897
9.	I use a set of criteria against which to evaluate the strength of the argument or proposition	20	61	3.0	1.190974833
10.	I summarize what I have heard or read to ensure I have understood properly.	20	75	3.7	1.371706582

The second research question of this current study is **To what extent MA students are aware of the critical thinking skills?** In statements 11 – 20, the MA students are asked if they are aware of using critical thinking skills. Table 2 displays the results of each statement. It reveals that **statement 16 - I explore statements for ambiguity to ensure I do not misconstrue their meaning** is the most reported statement with a high mean of 4.1 and a low standard deviation of 0.911909506. However, **statement 13 - I play devil's advocate in order to improve my grasp of an argument or proposition** – is ranked with a mean of 2.4 and a high standard deviation of 1.172292202.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of statements: 11-20:

No	Statements	No. of MA students	Σ	Means	Standard deviation
11.	I break down material so that I can see how ideas are ordered and raised.	20	74	3.7	1.128576187
12.	I assess the credibility of the person presenting the material I am evaluating.	10	68	3.4	0.994722918
13.	I play devil's advocate in order to improve my grasp of an argument or proposition.	20	48	2.4	1.172292202
14.	I set aside emotive language to avoid being swayed by bias or opinionated statements.	20	73	3.6	0.988086934
15.	I evaluate the evidence for an argument or proposition to see if it is strong enough to warrant belief.	20	71	3.5	1.276302225
16.	I explore statements for	20	82	4.1	0.911909506

	ambiguity to ensure I do not misconstrue their meaning.				
17.	I challenge proposals and arguments that appear to lack rigour.	20	57	2.8	1.308876577
18.	I weigh up the reliability of people's opinions.	20	70	3.5	1.192079121
19.	I ask questions to reinforce my understanding of the issue.	20	78	3.9	0.911909506
20.	I establish the assumptions that an argument rests upon.	20	68	3.4	0.940324692

Finally, the third research question of this current study is **What positive role that critical thinking skills can play in the teaching activities of MA students?** In statements 21 – 30, the MA students were asked about the positive role that critical thinking skills can play in their teaching activities. Table (3) shows the results of each statement. It reveals that statement 21 - *I draw conclusions from data I have analyzed in order to decide whether to accept or reject a proposition or argument*–is the most ranked statement with a high mean of 4.4 and a standard deviation of 1.273205652. Whereas, statement 26–*I look for what isn't there rather than concentrate solely on what is there* – is calculated with a low mean of 2.9and a high standard deviation of 1.293709477.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics of statements: 21-30:

No	Statement s	No. of MA students	Σ	Means	Standard deviation
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21.	I draw conclusions from data I have analyzed in order to decide whether to accept or reject a proposition or argument.	20	88	4.4	1.273205652
22.	I solicit input from other people to broaden my understanding of a subject.	20	65	3.2	1.019545823
23.	I analyze propositions to see if the logic is sound.	10	76	3.8	1.151657844
24.	I set aside my prejudices to evaluate arguments in a dispassionate, objective way.	20	74	3.7	1.128576187
25.	I distinguish major points from minor points.	20	75	3.7	1.019545823
26.	I look for what isn't there rather than concentrate solely on what is there.	20	58	2.9	1.293709477
27.	I reach my own conclusions rather than let myself be swayed by the opinions of others.	20	76	3.9	1.151657844
28.	I research a subject to enhance my understanding.	10	80	4.0	1.076055174
29.	I establish the underlying purpose of an argument or proposition.	20	75	3.7	0.716350399
30.	I consider new information to see whether I need to re-evaluate a previous conclusion.	20	79	3.5	1.051314966

Discussion

The results reveal that all statements answer the research questions. The EFL MA students rank statement 5 - ***I distinguish between facts and opinions*** - as the most significant statement with a mean of 4.6 to answer the first research question. It is important to notice that the students rank statement 13 - ***I play devil's advocate in order to improve my grasp of an argument or proposition*** – as the least significant statement with a

mean of 2.4. This implies that the students critically think of the use of explicit instructions in enhancing academic writing performance. Yet, if written tasks are employed, the study conclusions will be different. The role of critical thinking is best used in argumentative essay writing. Results indicate that the less developed arguments in constructing well-established essays will yield adverse results. This is because students find it hard to express and convey their voices in a convincing way.

To answer the first question, EFL MA students report resorting to different critical thinking skills in their academic writing, such as written tasks, assignments, theses and dissertations. Lin (2018) argues that critical thinking skills are vital in accomplishing academic writing success at higher educational institutions.

To answer the second research question, EFL MA students unveil that they are aware of the critical thinking skills which they use in their academic writing. This result is similar to Kolour & Yaghoubi (2015) who mention that critical thinking skills have a positive significant influence on students' writing of argumentative essays. However, Shirkhani & Fahim (2011) stress teachers' responsibility in carefully selecting suitable materials and activities that can promote critical thinking skills in academic writing courses.

To answer the third research question, results prove that EFL MA students have a positive attitude towards the activities carried out in their academic writing course.

Conclusion

The study investigates the role of critical thinking skills in an EFL academic writing course. It specifically identifies EFL MA students' responses on the integration of critical thinking skills in academic writing courses. Study findings uncover that the students have shown significant awareness and understanding towards the positive impact of critical thinking in their writing activities. This is clear in their responses which have been significantly and statistically high. Furthermore, findings unveil that EFL MA students' implementation of critical thinking skills increase their academic writing performance.

A further experimental research study is highly recommended in order to empirically investigate how critical thinking skills can affect and improve EFL MA students' academic writing outcomes by conducting pre-post tests and examining written tasks. Critical thinking skills must be an integral part in designing and re-designing any academic writing course materials and activities. Besides, students' engagement in regular practical training workshops should be a must. Also, it is important to

encourage students' extensive reading which will assist them to develop their background knowledge and sharpen their critical thinking skills. Thus, students will become better critical writers and will lead a fruitful academic life.

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