



## **Boosting Critical Thinking: A Prominent Aspect to Uphold Learners' Autonomy in the EFL Classroom**

### **Meningkatkan Pemikiran Kritis: Aspek Unggul untuk Mendorong Otonomi Pelajar di Kelas EFL**

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#### **Abstract**

This paper clarifies how learners' critical thinking could promote their autonomy in EFL classrooms. The study's findings contain opinions collections of Seventeen undergraduate students from the English Department of Universitas Negeri Padang. they took a Critical Reading course for a semester. This study analyzed toward their responsibilities in learning, confidence in operating their autonomy, and motivation that build up as well assist them in exploring reading texts. The good thing is that they can fully participate in classroom activities and discover themselves enjoy looking for more information about the reading. Students who reach this stage of thinking are believed to be critical and independent.

**Keywords:** *Critical Thinking, Autonomy, EFL Classroom*

#### **Abstrak**

Artikel ini menjelaskan peran berfikir kritis pelajar dalam meningkatkan otonomi belajar mereka di kelas EFL. Temuan penelitian berisi kumpulan pengalaman dan pendapat tertulis dari tujuh belas mahasiswa S1 dari Jurusan Bahasa Inggris Universitas Negeri Padang yang mengambil mata kuliah *Critical Reading* selama satu semester. Penelitian ini menganalisa mengenai tanggung jawab mereka dalam belajar, kepercayaan diri dalam mengoperasikan otonomi mereka, dan motivasi mereka dalam membangun serta membantu mereka mengeksplorasi teks bacaan. Hal baiknya adalah mereka dapat berpartisipasi penuh dalam kegiatan kelas dan menemukan diri mereka aktif dalam mencari informasi tambahan tentang teks bacaan yang tidak disertakan dalam teks. Siswa yang mencapai tahap berpikir ini diyakini kritis dan mandiri.

**Kata kunci:** *Berpikir Kritis, Autonomy, Kelas berbahasa Inggris*

## INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking skills have gained significant emphasis in education, particularly in language learning and teaching. They are regarded as fundamental for students' holistic development and success in various aspects of life. A prominent advocate for critical thinking in education, indeed emphasized the pivotal role of higher-order thinking skills in meaningful education (Paul, 1993). Including critical thinking in evaluating evidence underscores its fundamental role in fostering rational behavior and expanding knowledge. By integrating critical thinking exercises into education and everyday life, individuals can develop the skills necessary to make informed, reasoned decisions and navigate an increasingly complex world more effectively. Moreover, teaching students with the focus on critical skills also aligns with contemporary research and pedagogical practices that widely acknowledged considerably alter, control, and frame the process of learning English in a EFL Classroom (Connolly, 2000 and Kabilan, 2000).

In Critical Reading course, students are expected to be capable of critical reading skills (critical) where this reading skill appears interactively and sequentially (literally then intermediate). Teachers design and assign in classrooms play a crucial aspect in shaping students' perceptions of the importance of materials they learn. Stimulate critical thinking, encourage problem-solving, and promote real-world application, they empower students to engage more deeply with the subject matter and transfer their learning (Harizaj & Hajrulla, 2017). Moreover, these tasks and assignments significantly impact how students apply newly acquired knowledge in various contexts.

Encouraging classroom discussions aligned with critical thinking goals is a cornerstone of many educational methodologies today. It was the researcher has done in one semester. Such discussions facilitate active learning, enabling students to not only absorb information but also engage critically with it, fostering a deeper understanding of the subject matter. Moreover, when conducted in a safe and supportive environment, discussions can significantly contribute to students' confidence in expressing their ideas and perspectives (Taylor, 2002).

This discussion activity is applied after students reading between the line to a text or article. Taylor (2002) elaborated that the teacher takes responsibility in this activity is to arrange conversations by: 1. Establish a kind of conversation to start the class with; 2. Acquainted with the type of conversation that is occurring at any given point; and 3. Asking several questions to commence the type of conversation the teachers wishes for. Students are expected to grab on a more vital action in their learning process. They need to take responsibility for their learning journey.

This activity also lead to students' self regulation. Understanding self-regulation is indeed to consciously monitor one's cognitive processes, which is a crucial aspect of fostering critical thinking. Self-regulation acts as the conscious guide for individuals as they navigate their cognitive processes. It involves being aware of one's thoughts, actively monitoring them, and applying logical principles to enhance critical thinking abilities (Facione, 2020). Once an individual acknowledges the importance of reason, they can begin learning about logic. These essential features of thoughts include aim, questions at issue, message, comprehension and inferences, notions, belief, point of view, and frame of reference. Considering these elements encourages individuals to approach problems or situations critically, analyzing them from various angles (Paul & Elder, 2006). They should be encouraged to set goals, engage with the material

independently, seek clarification when needed, and actively participate in class activities.

### **Learners' Autonomy**

Learner autonomy has become more than just a desirable trait; it is become an essential aspect of learning. Empowering students to be more autonomous in the EFL classroom is key to their language acquisition. Little (1991) stated that autonomy refers to an individual's ability to detach themselves from external influences, engage in critical thinking and reflection, make decisions, and take actions independently. They have capability to decide what they do independently instead of being influenced by someone else (Faramarzi, Elekaei, and Tabrizi, 2016). When students actively engage and take ownership of their learning process, they are more likely to grasp language concepts, improve proficiency, and develop confidence in their language skills (Saeed, 2021; and Begum, 2019). The unprecedented circumstances, including the remote teaching environment and reliance on technology, have compelled learners to seize control of their own learning. With minimal teacher intervention, students are tasked with completing assignments, projects, and tasks independently. This situation necessitates a higher level of learner autonomy (Saeed, 2021).

Teachers play a vital role in guiding students toward autonomy by fostering an environment that encourages responsibility, providing clear expectations, and offering support and guidance as needed. Encouraging students to be sensible of their responsibilities and actively participate in the process of learning is essential for a successful learner-centered approach in EFL education (Begum, 2019). Encouraging learner autonomy in EFL education at the university level is imperative. Teachers should facilitate an environment that nurtures autonomy by providing guidance, resources, and support while encouraging students to get involve actively in their learning.

It is evident from various research sources that learner autonomy is influenced by numerous interconnected factors that encompass psychological, emotional, social, and cognitive aspects. These factors collectively contribute to a learner's capability to take control of their process of learning and actively engage in their educational journey. Here is a breakdown of the multifaceted factors that impact learner autonomy:

1. **Personality Factors and Learning Styles:** Elements like self consciousness, self-content, risk-taking, compassion, extroversion, and individual styles of learning significantly influence a learner's approach to autonomy. Understanding these traits helps individuals adapt learning strategies that suit their personalities and preferences (Scharle and Szabo, 2007).
2. **Learning Strategies:** Effective learners often possess specific strategies that aid in their autonomy. These strategies involve how learners plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning progress, influencing their ability to self-regulate their learning (Oxford, 2002).
3. **Collaboration and Reflection:** Collaboration through social interaction and reflective practices are highlighted as essential factors. Engaging with peers and introspective activities contribute to learners' autonomy by enhancing their cognitive, social, and affective dimensions of learning (Little, 2001).
4. **Self-Determination Theory:** Deci and Ryan (2016) emphasized competence and relatedness as crucial factors for learner autonomy. Feeling competent and connected socially contributes to individuals' self-regulation and autonomy in learning.

Overall, these multifaceted factors underscore the complex nature of learner autonomy. A comprehensive understanding of these influences helps educators design strategies and environments that foster learner autonomy effectively, acknowledging the diverse needs and preferences of individual learners.

### **Correlation of Critical thinking and Autonomy**

The emphasis on fostering autonomy and critical thinking skills in students has gained significant traction due to evolving academic requirements and societal needs. Recent studies highlight the gravity of autonomy and critical thinking in the framework of language learning and education overall. Raya, Lamb and Vieira (2007) emphasize the interconnectedness of critical thinking and autonomy. They convey idea that the ability to think critically is closely intertwined with the concept of autonomy. Developing critical thinking skills is, therefore, integral to fostering learner autonomy. This is compatible with Nosratinia and Zaker study (2013), who found that fostering critical thinking can affect the level in autonomous learning by empowering individuals to take charge of their learning journey and make informed decisions about their learning approaches. In addition, Critical thinking and Learners' autonomy should be recognized as important building blocks of the processes of language teaching and learning. Fahim and Haghghi (2014) investigated the relationship between EFL learners self-regulated, which is one of component in learners' autonomy, with critical thinking ability. Self-regulation skill as a skill that enables individuals to direct their behavior, emotions, and thoughts independently, even when those actions may conflict with immediate feelings or impulses (Clark & Zimmerman, 2014). They discovered that people who can control their own behavior also tend to have better critical thinking skills.

Discussing the text they have read, reflecting on their reading would give students confidence in understanding the text. It would also motivate them in expressing their thoughts openly so that they could participate more active in their learning process. Critical thinking skills empower learners to take control of their learning process. When students can think critically, analyze information, and problem-solve effectively, they become more autonomous in their learning endeavors.

### **METHOD**

A qualitative method was used to find out how critical thinking could boost students autonomy. Moreover, students who enrolled in Critical Reading course participated in this research. They were fifth-semester English education students at Universitas Negeri Padang. There were seventeen students who were selected through purposive sampling.

The data was collected thru open-ended questionnaire. Open-ended questions authorize informants to convey their thought and opinion without being intervened by other (Foddy, 1993). There were 5 questions related to critical thinking and learners' autonomy. The answers were in form of short answers. This instrument was intended to explore their perspective and experiences about how critical reading course could explore and establish their critical thinking and autonomy during one semester. The students were mandated to share as much details as possible. The students were labeled as informants (C1-C17) without mentioned their real name. They were given two days to fill in the gform questionnaire. After gathering and collecting the data, researcher organized, analyzed the data for the insights, and reported on the insights derived from the analysis. consistency patterns were found and analyzed in various viewpoints revealed in data.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Students Responsibilities in Learning**

According to a question, “What efforts you need to do to get a great outcomes for this class?” the most participant already know about their responsibilities. Basic of learning autonomy is that the learner accept responsibility in his/her learning (Chang, 2007). Students are capable to take an action in the learning activities because they know their goals to achieve successful outcomes. Some of the students, prepare themselves well in every meetings

- *Every week the lecturer gives us a new topic about what should we discuss in the classroom a week before and I have to prepare myself to find resources relate to the topic. (C4)*
- *I have to understand the topic since all of us have to participate in the classroom discussion. (C7)*
- *I challenge my self to find more information about the topic and participate actively in the classroom and I find the progress from my work. (C1)*
- *The lecturer always provide new material in the same schedule, so I also get my preparation such as related articles, and video in the same time. (C17)*

Based on the answers, some of them, did not push themselves in learning process. No special efforts they attempted to achieve a great outcomes.

- *Reading the materials, discussion, present my opinion are what I did in class. Sometimes I active in the process, somehow I just keep silent when I don't understand (C16)*
- *I love reading, it enrich my knowledge. I just read the text a day before the class' schedule. (C3)*
- *Depend on the material, If I enjoy the text, I found another sources.(C13)*

Critical thinking exercises have a wide range of impacts in human life. A small task could help them answering simple questions up to an assignment which enables people to analyze, evaluate and comprehend information in a deeper and more rational manner. It is not just about accepting information at face value but rather engaging in reasoning, questioning, and examining evidence to form well-reasoned beliefs and make informed decisions (Paul, 1985). Enrolled in this critical reading class, supposed to be natural for students to know the purpose of they were taking the class, what they will learn and which strategies they should use during lectures. As what Chang said, if learner know what are their responsibilities in learning, their autonomy is start to take a part.

### **Reasoning, Comprehend, and Synthesis the reading material**

Scharle and Szabo (2007) stated that individual learning styles significantly influence a learner's approach to autonomy. According to a question, “Do you have personal ways to understand and comprehend the reading material before discussing in the classroom?. It was found that the majority of the participants try to find several sources from any platform they know to enhance their understanding, and comprehend reading materials. *I like to find my resources from Youtube, rather than articles. I could visualize the text easily (C15)*. C6 told that, “*Google is the best way to help me in reading the materials*”. In line with C6, C8 explained that “*For better understanding I try to find related articles from Google in Bahasa Indonesia*. Some of them get a help from their friends. Students' learning styles and strategies can alter extensively within their preferences. Some learning strategies might appear more effective and more

appropriate in a certain situations and for certain learner (Saville-Troike, 2006). The Students possess particular strategies in switching their critical thinking that aid in their autonomy.

This result aligns with previous study conducted by Myers and Dyer in 2006, as well as with the findings of Nosratinia, Asiabar, and Sarabchian in 2014. These studies collectively suggest a positive correlation between critical thinking and various aspects of learning styles, language learning strategies, and academic performance. The connection between critical thinking and learning styles indicates that the way students prefer to learn could impact their ability to think critically. Similarly, the relationship between critical thinking skills and language learning strategies suggests that individuals who employ effective strategies in language learning might also demonstrate higher levels of critical thinking. It imply that fostering critical thinking skills might not only enhance academic performance but also influence how individuals approach learning tasks and problem-solving across different domains. Such insights could be valuable for educators in tailoring teaching methodologies to promote critical thinking alongside specific learning styles or strategies.

### **Students' Collaboration and Reflection**

Group or Peer engagement and introspective activities play important roles in enhancing learner autonomy. Engaging with peers encourages independent thinking, diverse perspectives, and the ability to navigate various viewpoints. This approach aligns with McKernan's belief in open-ended education (1993), emphasizing the significance of providing learners with a comfortable environment to develop their skills and flourish. C2 explained that, *"I ask my friends to do a mini discussion outside the schedule before class begins. I can get a lot information from my friends"*. C5 answered that, *"Discussion help me to turn on my mind, exchange our opinion give me a time to think and a change to speak up"*. C9 also explained that, *"At first, I didn't really participate on classroom but when I saw my friend deliver his/her point of view. It is trigger me"*. According to Siegle (1980), establishing such a challenge, fun and comfortable learning environment could encourage learners to question, seek justification also nurtures self-reliance and a deeper understanding of the subject matter. Therefore, it is believe this process create spaces where learners feel encouraged to explore, inquire, and engage actively in their education, contributing significantly to the development of critical thinking skills and fostering a lifelong love for learning.

Discussion also help students in reflecting their learning process. As what Nuraini, et al (2020) stated that self-reflection is a powerful process that enables individuals to introspect and make sense of their thoughts, actions, and experiences. This process let learners involve a deliberate examination of one's beliefs, motivations, and behaviors, often in relation to past experiences and existing knowledge. Introspective activities, such as self-reflection, enable learners to assess their own learning strategies, strengths, and areas for improvement, stimulating a sense of ownership and regulate over their process of learning (Little, 2021). *I love participating in the classroom. It gives me some different point of views and help me in organized my thought and where I stand. (C4). "sometimes I just think why they could think deeper than me. I'm curious and find out the answers, discussion help me to learn from them"(C11)*. This activity contributes holistically to the development of learners' autonomy by enriching their cognitive, social, and affective dimensions of learning. They encourage a proactive approach to learning, empowering individuals to take charge of their learning journey while benefiting from collaborative and introspective experiences.

### **Students' Self-Regulation**

Self-regulation involves the conscious control and management of one's thoughts, emotions, desires, and actions to achieve specific goals or respond appropriately to various situations. Chu et al., Panadero, and Ramirez-Arellano et al, in Nizaruddin, Kusmaryono I (2023) emphasize the multifaceted nature of self-regulation; metacognitive abilities, motivation, and active behavior, which integrates various components to guide behavior and cognition towards achieving specific learning objectives. Self-regulation involves an individual's deliberate efforts to manage their actions, thoughts, and emotions during activities, especially in the pursuit of learning goals. Learning motivation serves as the impetus for students to engage actively in learning activities. *"I want to find more resources just because I am really curious to understand the topic"*. (C1). C16 stated that, *"The lecturer frees us to find the reading sources and how we explain our thought and it makes me more confident to speak what I already get from what I read."* (C16). *"Participate in discussion, exchange ideas are my way to get better learning outcomes."* (C12). Based on their opinions can be interpreted that critical thinking plays a significant role in the self-regulation process of learning. It serves as a cognitive tool that enables individuals to manage their learning experiences more effectively (Phan, 2010). Critical thinking fosters adaptability by encouraging individuals to be flexible in their thinking and approach. In the self-regulation of learning, learners have the ability to adjust learning strategies, seek additional resources, or modify study techniques based on the evolving understanding of a subject. Meanwhile, learners autonomy is boosted through learners intrinsic motivation. When individuals are motivated by their own interests and values, they are more likely to take charge of their learning, regulate their efforts, and persist in the face of challenges, ultimately leading to a more autonomous and self-directed approach to learning. In line with Dickinson (1995), who stated that success in learning doesn't automatically lead to increased motivation for all students; rather, it seems to have a more significant impact on motivation for those who actively accept responsibility for their learning outcomes. By integrating critical thinking into the self-regulation process, individuals become more active and engaged learners. They take ownership of their learning journey, becoming more efficient in setting goals, monitoring progress, and adapting their strategies, all essential elements for successful and autonomous learning.

### **CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS**

It is showed that promoting critical thinking could make the students autonomous in language learning. This process is indeed inherent to each individual, but its manifestation can differ based on various factors such as learning styles, strategies, motivations, and backgrounds. Integrating critical thinking into language education indeed offers students a pathway to unlock deeper meanings within discourse, aiding in comprehension and fostering more authentic self-expression in the target language. Recognizing and incorporating critical thinking skills into teaching methodologies can revolutionize language classrooms, promoting interactive and learner-centered environments. This approach not only enhances students' intellectual capacities but also nurtures learner autonomy, encouraging students to take charge of their own learning.

Some students might exhibit a higher degree of autonomy due to their preferred learning styles or effective strategies they've developed, while others may showcase it

differently due to their unique motivations or cultural influences, means that they have autonomy in learning inside them.

It is recommended to have further research on this topic which can explore more about the relationship between these two things; critical thinking and learner' autonomy. It is advisable for future research to have more than only open-ended questionnaire to gather students' perception. An interview is worth conducting, besides statistical analysis should also be included.

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